



Article Types: Research Article

Received:22.04.2024

Accepted:10.06.2024

Published: 30.06.2024

Doi:10.5281/zenodo.12572026

Cite as: Demirkol Orak, S. (2024). The Effect of Oral Exam on Students' Speaking Anxiety: A Case Study. *Disiplinlerarası Dil ve Kültür Çalışmaları Dergisi*, 2(1), 18-36.

Volume/Issue:2(1)

Pub Date Season: Summer

Pages:18-36

## The Effect of Oral Exam Styles on Students' Speaking Anxiety: A Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the challenges associated with speaking anxiety in language learning, particularly during oral exams, by examining its impact on students' performance and exploring concerns among teachers and students regarding the validity and impartiality of such assessments. In this sense, the study delves into the challenges associated with speaking anxiety in language learning, particularly during oral exams. Recognizing the crucial role that speaking abilities play in both everyday life and educational contexts, the study investigates the impact of speaking anxiety on students' performance. For this qualitative research, five EFL teachers and five EFL students from a preparatory school were purposefully sampled and interviewed. The findings reveal concerns from both teachers and students regarding the validity and impartiality of oral exams, especially when multiple examiners are involved. Additionally, students reported discomfort when required to work in pairs on exam day and when interacting with unfamiliar examiners. The study's limitations include its small sample size and qualitative nature, underscoring the need for mixed-method research to yield more comprehensive and generalizable results. Such an approach would enhance our understanding of speaking anxiety and its implications for English language teaching and assessment, ultimately contributing to improved pedagogical practices and student outcomes. This study emphasizes the importance of addressing speaking anxiety to foster a more effective and supportive learning environment for language learners. Further exploration in this area could provide valuable insights into effective strategies for managing and alleviating speaking anxiety among language learners.

**Keywords:** Oral exam, English language teaching, Debilitative anxiety, Facilitative anxiety, Language assessment

## Sözlü Sınav Tarzlarının Öğrencilerin Konuşma Kaygısı Üzerindeki Etkisi: Bir Durum Çalışması

### ÖZET

Bu çalışma, dil öğreniminde konuşma kaygısıyla ilgili zorlukları, özellikle sözlü sınavlar sırasında, öğrencilerin performansı üzerindeki etkisini inceleyerek ve öğretmenler ile öğrenciler arasındaki geçerlilik ve tarafsızlık endişelerini araştırarak ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Buradan hareketle, çalışma, dil öğrenme sürecinde özellikle sözlü sınavlar sırasında yaşanan konuşma kaygısı ile ilgili zorlukları incelemektedir. Günlük yaşamda ve eğitim bağlamında konuşma becerilerinin oynadığı kritik rolü tanıyarak, çalışma konuşma kaygısının öğrencilerin performansı üzerindeki etkisini araştırmaktadır. Bu nitel araştırma için, bir hazırlık okulundan beş İngilizce öğretmeni ve beş İngilizce öğrencisi amaçlı örnekleme ile seçilip görüşülmüştür. Bulgular, özellikle birden fazla sınav gözetmeninin yer aldığı durumlarda sözlü sınavların geçerliliği ve tarafsızlığıyla ilgili hem öğretmenlerin hem de öğrencilerin endişelerini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, öğrenciler

*sınav günü çiftler halinde çalışmaları ve tanımadıkları gözetmenlerle etkileşimde bulunmaları durumunda rahatsızlık hissettiklerini belirtmişlerdir. Çalışmanın sınırlılıkları küçük örnekleme ve nitel doğasıdır; bu durum, daha kapsamlı ve genelleştirilebilir sonuçlar elde etmek için karma yöntem araştırmalarının gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır. Bu yaklaşım, konuşma kaygısı ve İngilizce dil öğretimi ile değerlendirmesi üzerindeki etkilerini daha iyi anlamamıza yardımcı olacaktır, sonuç olarak pedagojik uygulamaların ve öğrenci başarılarının iyileştirilmesine katkı sağlayacaktır. Bu çalışma, dil öğrencileri için daha etkili ve destekleyici bir öğrenme ortamı sağlamak amacıyla konuşma kaygısının ele alınmasının önemini vurgulamaktadır. . Bu alandaki daha ileri araştırmalar, dil öğrencileri arasında konuşma kaygısını yönetme ve hafifletme konusunda etkili stratejilere yönelik değerli içgörüler sunabilir.*

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Sözlü sınav, İngiliz dili öğretimi, Zayıflatıcı kaygı, Kolaylaştırıcı kaygı, Dil değerlendirmesi

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, the focal point of language teaching has altered from rule-based grammar teaching to communication-based teaching with the born of communicative teaching methods together with the Suggestopedia. As a result of prioritizing learners' needs firsthand, the content of the materials and classes' designs have been all reshaped in accordance with the communicative way of teaching and learning trends. So, language does not merely mean learning and internalizing a pre-set of rules and employing them in grammatical patterns, it requires writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills equally. On the other hand, speaking is the most difficult ability for learners to master when the studies are thoroughly examined, since speaking anxiety exacerbates the difficulty with language creation (Brown, 2003). Most people define learning a new language as speaking it, and the ability to carry on a seamless conversation is how success in the language is measured (Nunan, 2002). According to Brown (2003), speaking in an L2 or foreign language can be challenging for learners at both the elementary and advanced levels, and even native speakers may have speaking anxiety when taking an assessment. Speaking is an essential aspect of daily life, yet having to evaluate and grade something for a predetermined goal makes people nervous when they have to speak in front of others. This fear also makes pupils perform poorly on oral exams. Due to the subjectivity problem in tests, emotions, particularly speaking anxiety, were not given the proper attention until the last few decades. But the growing need of impartiality in oral exams has made fear and rapport in oral exam style equally important.

### Statement of the problem

Foreign language education has witnessed some solid changes in the last decades, and according to Young (1986), language learning pedagogy has had the transference from the body to mind and emotions pointing out behaviorism, cognitive and metacognitive fields, and affective factors. Anxiety is one of the most apparent affective traits. Until recent decades, emotions especially the speaking anxiety have not been given the deserved care because of the subjectivity issue in the exams. However, the increasing significance of objectivity in oral exams has put equal importance on both anxiety and oral exam style rapport. After the acceptance of the relationship between language anxiety and oral exam style as an important construct (Horwitz, 1986), researchers began to search for some strategies to reduce students' anxiety levels. As speaking assessment requires many factors to be taken into consideration, it is the most troubled part of the assessment process at a state university prep school as well. This study aims to identify the problematic aspects of the speaking assessment procedure and its effect on students' anxiety. The work of assessing and judging students' learning is not an easy task. In order to come out with an objective assessment of students' work, teachers and instructors utilize numerous instruments, one of which is testing.

## **Aim and Significance of the Study**

In consideration of the striking truth that oral exam styles are a very common complicated and puzzling field, it is urgent to underline the root problematic areas, such as oral exam style, and its perceived effect on students' anxiety levels, and seek the most applicable solutions which would be beneficial for both teachers and learners. This study is essentially important in two ways. Firstly, it identifies teachers' and students' ideas about the available oral exam style and reveals the experienced problems. Secondly, it helps the researchers who are interested in this area to find out some solutions for the faced problems to offer a more satisfactory oral exam style. The overall purpose is to set the most applicable oral exam style in the context of the study in order to reduce oral exam anxiety.

## **Research Questions**

- 1) What do the instructors and students think about the existing oral exam style?
  - a) Is there a relation between oral exam style and speaking anxiety?
  - b) If so, what would be the most appropriate oral exam style to decrease the students' oral exam anxiety in the context of the study?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Speaking Anxiety and Oral Exams**

Speaking anxiety, commonly known as glossophobia, is a widespread phenomenon affecting individuals across various demographics. This anxiety manifests as an intense fear or nervousness about speaking in public, which can stem from concerns about being judged, making mistakes, or facing an unresponsive audience. Symptoms often include rapid heartbeat, trembling, sweating, and a feeling of dread, which can significantly impair one's ability to communicate effectively. The prevalence of speaking anxiety is notable, with research indicating that it affects approximately 15-30% of the population to some degree. Effective management strategies include cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), practice and preparation, relaxation techniques, and, in some cases, medication. Studies suggest that with appropriate intervention, individuals can significantly reduce their anxiety and improve their public speaking skills (American Psychological Association, 2020; National Institute of Mental Health, 2021).

Anxiety is one of the many emotive elements that come into play when learning a second language, along with readiness to speak, self-efficacy, intelligence, and attitude. The strongest indicator of the importance of speaking anxiety in second language acquisition is the abundance of research on the topic in the literature (Philips, 1991). In countless studies, academics and language teachers have highlighted the reality of anxiety, especially speaking anxiety when learning a new language (Garcia de Blakely, 2017; Jackson, 2002; Kitano, 2001; Liu, 2006). According to them, learning a new language does not refer to memorizing numerous vocabularies or practicing pre-set rules. Language learning requires communicating by experiencing stress, encountering ambiguous situations, and maintaining communication under the effect of these parameters. So, within the effects of aforesaid various stress-evoking parameters, learners' speaking anxiety practically would increase in learning a new language. Horwitz, (1986) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) state that even adults who are proud of their speaking skills face challenges in presentations even in their mother tongue, so it is a very normal and expected feature of communication in the second language to have a speaking anxiety.

Cohen and Norst (1989) point out that sweating, trembling, headaches, and a pounding heart are the most encountered symptoms in the speeches of anxious students. Students are faced with those symptoms since they are not able to say what they already know and this situation makes them feel frustrated, panicky, and sometimes even outraged. Tobias (1979) agrees with Horwitz and reports that

even the most competent students in L2 are tackling in the oral exams because of their high speaking anxiety while the less competent students are not demonstrating such a higher level of speaking anxiety. That is why at the end of the day, there is not a striking gap between the competent and less competent students' oral exam scores as a result of speaking anxiety problems. Moreover, some avoidance strategies have been developed by anxious students such as not attending classes or postponing the assigned speaking tasks (Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002).

By backing up the aforementioned scholars' reports and related research studies' results, it is proven that there is a persistent correlation between L2 speaking anxiety and L2 proficiency (Horwitz, 1986; Liu, 2006; Philips, 1992; Young, 1991). Philips (1992) reported in one French medium study that while students with high levels of anxiety were noticed to get lower grades from exams, the less anxious students demonstrated the vice-versa version of the whole picture. Even consecutive studies were in line with the findings of the Philips's study (Aida, 1994; Kitano, 2001; Yan & Wang, 2001; Zhang, 2001).

However, in contrast to the aforementioned negative correlation, Chastain (1975) and Kleinmann (1977) report a positive correlation between higher anxiety levels and higher exam grades in their study. According to Philips (1991), there is a dilemma which is in today's '21st-century' terms are 'getting along with the students' or 'getting on with the students' (Allwright, 2009), which means that teachers and students are stuck in the border of enjoyment factor of the communicative activities or acquiring the pre-set rules of the communicative activities. A certain number of communicative activities that aim to facilitate oral proficiency can also cause anxiety at the same time together with reducing the enjoyment factor related to language learning principles (Philips, 1991). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is asserted that more visual aids and inductive learning strategies are all helping to facilitate learning satisfaction and in turn increase the enjoyment of learning while decreasing speaking anxiety (Allwright, 2009). For that reason, friendly and communicative encouraging classroom settings and exam designs are always advised to set up in L2 learning.

Although speaking anxiety is generally demonstrated as the reason for the failure in the oral exam or in general terms in L2 learning, the sample situation in the study of Liu (2006) is vice-versa. Liu relies on the sample situation of Bailey in 1983 to report the vice-versa of the claim regarding the negative correlation between speaking anxiety and L2 competence in oral exams. According to the study, Bailey kept records of her daily French medium classes, and it is asserted in the dairies that while at the first step cause of competitiveness, or being humored in front of her classmates, Bailey developed avoidance strategies, even leaving the class for a long duration. However, this competitive mood and state of anxiety, evoke her willingness to learn and compete with her friends. Finally, Bailey succeeded in reversing her speaking anxiety to a positive state of willingness to communicate without any hesitation. So, it is possible to talk about also positive outcomes of speaking anxiety and oral exam relations.

The word exam always contains a kind of excitement and anxiety issues under its umbrella. Since an exam means being evaluated by someone else with a purpose and within a settled frame, being evaluated by peers or persons from higher titles may have a discouraging effect on the candidates. There are two types of speaking anxiety: debilitating and facilitative anxiety. While debilitating anxiety causes failure at the end of the learning adventure, facilitative anxiety provokes the feeling of winning and pushes individuals to study harder for better results.

### **Problems of Testing the Speaking Skill**

Among the four basic language skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing, speaking is the most difficult one to test (Brown, 2003). Various situations can be counted as the reasons of this situation, but the most important reason of this condition according to Brown (2003), Lumo (2004), and Yıldız (2013) is that it is hard to describe the construction of speaking. Since speaking is the combination

of intonation, stress, pronunciation, content, extent of vocabulary, fluency, and accuracy. That is why also ensuring the validity and reliability of the test apart from constructing the test itself are among the questioning issues for testing speaking in other terms oral exams. Kitao and Kitao (1996) state that speaking includes various skills under its branches which are not related to each other but at the same time hard to test themselves alone and objectively.

In the oral exams, instead of having holistic scoring, it is advised to break the speech into categories: can be categorized as pronunciation, intonation, fluency, and accuracy (Fulcher, 2003; Kito & Kitao, 1996; Yıldız, 2013). Also, Fulcher (2003) suggests discourse analysis, employment of methods of pragmatics, and ways of communication strategies as categories.

Apart from the construction of the speaking test and its categories, one another problem is fixing the strong borders between listening and speaking. Since listening is a prerequisite for speaking. While listening is counted as the receptive skill, speaking is named as a productive skill though there are opposite ideas in the literature that there is not a fixed border among the skills as they are all running in the mind cognitively without any abstract observation (Brown, 2003). However, Kitao and Kitao (1996) claim that speaking relies on comprehensible input that is provided by listening, so it is possible to mention an exchange between listening and speaking. This feature of speaking brings another challenge to assessing speaking skills, as it is not clear whether speaking is purely assessed or also listening is under discussion. Successful communication depends on first the success of listening, then speaking. Also, the listener's acquaintance with the speaker's accent affects the flow of communication (Heaton, 1990).

### **Speaking Tasks**

Speaking exercises in language learning have drawn a lot of attention lately because of the way they affect learner confidence, accuracy, and fluency. Comparing interactive speaking activities like role-plays and group discussions to traditional approaches, studies show that learners are more engaged and use language more effectively. Students' communication skill improved significantly when they engaged in interactive speaking exercises, as demonstrated by Tavit and Karagül's (2021) findings. In a similar vein, Chen and Cheng's research from 2022 demonstrated the value of task-based language instruction in improving speaking abilities. They pointed out that these kinds of activities offer real-world scenarios that encourage students to practice more. These results highlight how crucial it is to provide varied and engaging speaking exercises in language courses in order to improve students' speaking skills and general language competency.

As a result of communicative-based teaching being the center of attention in the last decades, speaking has become the focus of language learning, so the needs of teachers, students, and teaching materials have been developed in this direction. As a natural result of this, lesson designs and exam designs have been shaped from the communicative-based teaching and learning dimension. The overall objective has been to vaccinate the consciousness of communicative L2 competence (Dörnyei, 2009). Thanks to this approach, communication among learners has gained significance. Education materials have been designed by prioritizing communicative tasks.

When language is perceived as a coin, if teaching is the one part, testing is the other part of the coin, they are inseparable. The introduction of communicative-based teaching into the field of language teaching has brought changes also in the form of testing as the new trend is communication from that time on. This shift has also affected the assessment procedure. Oral exams have been redesigned accordingly. Various task types have been included in the oral exam styles with the aim of assessing students' oral competency because each task uncovers the speaking ability from a different version and affects students' speaking anxiety levels separately. While some tasks or question types are increasing

the students' anxiety level, some others are decreasing. Also while some tasks have a debilitating effect on students, others have a facilitative. That is why, the oral exam style requires careful attention.

The task can be described as communicative language practices. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), tasks include the speaker using the prescribed language in order to reach a defined situation. Tasks are defining the flow of the conversation, so task design is important. The appropriateness of the style, vocabulary, and content together with intonation and pronunciation regarding the tasks and teachers' expectations from students are important. There should be a harmony among them. Otherwise, it is not realistic to expect students to combine the irrelevant pieces to see the whole picture. The aim and the tasks should be all clear beforehand.

The design of the tasks should be in accordance with the student's level and the purpose of the assessment (Brown, 2003). Similarly, expectations regarding coherence, fluency, accuracy, word choices, and mechanics should be introduced to the students beforehand to help to decrease their anxiety level and increase their awareness in terms of evaluation. According to Brown (2003), not only task designs, and expectations, but also evaluation criteria should be introduced to students. Ensuring variety in the oral exam is vital, as it is not reliable to ask the same task to all students. Oral exam tasks may include individual tasks, pair works, or group works. Adopting various tasks at various stages of the exam is better, as students' anxiety is different in individual tasks and pair tasks (Yıldız, 2013). In this way even if students get anxious at individual tasks, they may become successful in pair work, so teachers increase the students' success chance. As Lumo (2004) states: "if someone is good at describing, it does not automatically mean that he or she is also good at comparing things, telling stories, or justifying an opinion" (p. 32). One another advantage of adapting various tasks is collecting much data to reach the final decision. Some suggested task types by Burgess and Head (2005):

- Interview Tasks
- Presentation Tasks
- Negotiation Tasks
- Discussion Tasks

Each task type aforesaid has idiosyncratic characteristics and requirements. While interview tasks require mechanic turn taking; discussion and negotiation tasks calls for an interactive flow of speech. On the one hand presentation tasks are extensive speech parts, which are generally in the form of monologues, on the other hand, discussion tasks ask for more than two speakers, and their speech parts are not structured as in the case of interviews or presentations (Lumo, 2004). There are also descriptive and narrative tasks. Similar to interviews and presentations, narrative and descriptive tasks can be used for individual structured tasks, or in the form of discussions. Assessors, teachers, test developers, or experts can define the outline and requirements of the tasks. They can be organized as individual or group tasks. Descriptive tasks can be adopted in the form of picture descriptions in the structured or semi-structured oral exam types. Narrative tasks can be the versions of asking examinees about any events that they have been through or choosing a picture and generating a story from the picture (Luma, 2004).

## **METHOD**

The aim of the present descriptive case study is to identify teachers' and students' ideas regarding the existing oral exam style. It also proposes a more satisfactory oral exam style (based on the problems encountered) to lower the anxiety caused by speaking exams in the context of a foreign language school in a state university in Turkey.

Oral exam anxiety and anxiety-provoking oral exam styles are one of the hot topics under discussion in recent years, especially in higher education organizations. To comprehend the root reasons for the problem, it is advised to analyze the blind points of the iceberg, which refers to examining the issue from both students' and teachers' aspects.

The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) What do the instructors /students think about the existing oral exam style?
  - a) Is there a relation between oral exam style and speaking anxiety?
  - b) If so, what would be the most appropriate speaking exam style to decrease the students' oral exam anxiety in the context of the study?

This chapter defines the setting and participants, data collection tools, research design, and data analysis.

### **Setting and Participants**

The present qualitative case study was conducted in the mid-size Preparation department of the School of Foreign Languages situated in the east part of Turkey. The School has two different departments: the first one is the distance learning English Language Teaching department, and the second one is the English Preparation department. The study was conducted in the preparation department, this department presents English language classes to the students from the departments of Mechanical Engineering, Civil Aviation Engineering, Mechatronic Engineering, Software Engineering, English Language and Literature, and English Language and Teaching. The school's total student population is 349, and 48 of them are from foreign nations, particularly Syrian, Egyptian, and Iraqi. The objective of the School is to equip students with both daily and academic English to back them up in their English-medium departments in the adjacent years. There are a total 30 English Language teaching lecturers in the School of Foreign Languages, 23 of them are employed in the preparation department, and the rest are employed in the distance learning department. The school has 20 prep classrooms, 12 of them are engineering classes, 4 of them are English Language and Teaching classes, and 4 of them are English Language and Literature classes. Classroom sizes are around 17, and students are getting 20 hours of main course classes in addition to two hours of Computer Assisted Language Learning (C.A.L.L.) in a week. 20 hours of main course classes are shared by two co-teachers, and they are named as "main course 1" teacher and "main course 2" teacher. The only difference between them is, the main course 1 teacher is the course advisor, responsible for also managing and grading the writing portfolio process. C.A.L.L. class is managed by a third teacher. Teachers are all adopting the same course book, and teachers are beginning each lesson by continuing from which part the previous teacher has stopped.

Before starting the lessons at the beginning of the first semester, students all sit a proficiency exam at the very beginning of the academic year, and the ones who get the adequate score pass directly to their departments without attending the courses at the School of Foreign Languages. And the ones who cannot get sufficient scores begin to take the lessons at the School of Foreign Languages. According to the standards settled by The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), students start getting English courses from the A1 level and end the preparatory education with a B1+, if they become successful in all of the exams.

When it comes to the assessment, the school is employing one visa, one final exam, and two oral exams together with four writing tasks. Apart from those exams and tasks, students' classroom performance grade (CPG) is included in the final marks of the students. It is beneficial to underline that all these assessment instruments' percentages affect the calculation of the final mark differently to decide whether the student deserves to complete the preparatory school education or repeat the same year. The students were not trained in any speaking skill lesson, but speaking is delivered integrated.

**The Oral Exam Style of the Preparatory School**

There are two examiners, and the school is adopting interview-based oral exams. One examiner is taking notes, and the other is asking questions. There are warm-up questions and responsive questions in the exam. Warm-up questions are not graded, they are utilized to calm down the students. Responsive questions are only graded. Students are getting into the classroom one by one, and each interview is lasting around 8 or 10 minutes. Examiners are not the students' main course teachers, but examiners are chosen among the other teachers in order to avoid subjectivity. All prep schools have the oral exam on the same day.

**Participants**

For the participants, the present qualitative case study was conducted with, 2 males (one from Engineering class, one from English Language and Teaching class), 3 female students (one from engineering, one from English language and Teaching, and one from English Language and Literature class) (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Demographic Information of the Student Participants.

Departments	Gender	
	Femal e	Male
Studying Engineering	1	1
Studying ELL	1	
Studying ELT	1	1
<b>Total</b>	3	2

In addition, 2 male, 3 female, total 5 English language teaching teachers at the preparation department of the School of Foreign Languages took part in the interviews. Teacher participants Bachelor's degree graduation media were English Language and Teaching, English Language and Literature, and Department of English Translation and Interpreting. Teachers' educational backgrounds are all different. (see Table 2 for the demographic information).

**Table 2.** Demographic Information of the Teacher Participants.

Academic Career	Gender	
	Female	Male
Studying MA	1	
Graduate of MA	1	1
Studying PHD	2	
<b>Total</b>	4	1



### **Data Collection Process**

According to Saunders et al. (2012), convenience sampling is one of the most suitable ways of collecting data for research at any time the participants are volunteer and suitable, without concerning any criteria. Considering the elements of time and effort practicality, convenience sampling was employed. The participants took part in the study without any participant selection criteria. However, to ensure variety and richness in data, one student from each different department was chosen. The only criteria for the students were their departments. One student from each department was chosen to enable the variety.

### **Instruments**

As also referred to in the name of qualitative study, interviews were employed in the study to collect data. Interviews were intentionally chosen as they allow researchers to receive more detailed data firsthand. Interviews enable participants to talk freely without any hesitation concerning the influence of the researcher (Dawson, 2002). Interview questions were adopted from a master's degree study (Yıldız, 2013) which was carried out in Turkey and in the same part of Turkey. Questions were converted according to the research context under the consultancy of the course coordinator.

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted at the School of Foreign Languages at a state university in Turkey. After fixing an appropriate time with the participants, interviews were carried out. Interviews were held when all of the classes ended at the school in order to ensure silence and a research-friendly environment. Interviews were carried out at the office of the researcher. Participants' consent was taken before the interviews to record their voices and they were ensured that their names are not going to be uttered at any pace of the study (see Appendix 1). Also, student participants were ensured that their comments were not going to affect their exam scores. Interviews were held separately, and each of them lasted between 15 and 18 minutes, and later all of the recordings were transcribed to be analyzed later.

Interviews were held in the mother tongue with the student participants in order not to provoke their speaking anxiety, and to reach the most detailed data. As for the teacher participants, the interview language was English since English is the second language, and major of the teacher participants, interviews were conducted in English with teachers. After transcribing the recordings, all of the transcriptions were translated into English before the content analysis session, and transcribed versions of the recordings were cross-checked by an expert from the Department of English Language and Teaching.

### **Data Analysis**

After all of the interviews were held with both students and teachers on different days of the same week. Interviews were held in Turkish (mother tongue) with students, but after transcribing the recordings, they were all translated into English and cross-checked by an expert in the field. Teachers' interviews had been held in English, so there was not any need to translate them. The transcribed interviews were subjected to content analysis. The process of content analysis has some steps: coding and thematization. Coding started with an iterative reading of all interviews to establish the themes and the most common and repetitive words chosen as the codes.

### **FINDINGS**

The study was conducted based on the increasing problems with the available oral exam style held in the School of Foreign Languages at a state University in the east part of Turkey. Adopting a qualitative research design, it aimed to identify the ideas of teachers and students about the available oral exam style and to find out if there is a relationship between the available oral exam style and students' speaking

anxiety. Also, it proposes a more satisfactory oral exam style in that school's context. Findings are going to be presented in this chapter in accordance with the interview questions.

**Findings with Reference to Interview Questions**

The codes were classified to reach the themes. From the data obtained through the interviews with 5 teachers, 5 themes emerged at the end to answer the research questions (see Table 3). Unrelated sentences were excluded from the analysis of the interviews. Frequencies of the codes were paid attention to uncovering the hidden themes. Similar themes were reached from the interviews held with teachers and students.

**Table 3**

*Themes and Frequencies of the Codes From Teachers' Interviews*

Themes	Codes with Frequencies		
Standardization	The danger of being objective while grading students (28)	Undetailed rubrics (8)	Share of responsibility by double examiners (17)
Teaching Strategies	What we do in the classroom does not match what we do in the exam (19)		
Exam Duration	Flexible time is given for the exam (12)	Appropriate level of questions (8)	
Speech Anxiety	A positive relationship between speech anxiety and exam duration (4)	Students negatively affected by interview-based questions (6)	A positive relationship between the number of questions and speech anxiety (7)
Exam Proposal	Various question types (5) (warm-up questions / responsive questions/pair tasks)	Visual aids as prompts (flashcards, picture description) (3)	Video/audio recording of the exams (6)

*Theme 1: Standardization*

All of the participant teachers pointed out their discomfort with the grading procedure in the exam though there was a common rubric for all teachers and classrooms. They complained about the subjectivity among teachers. They accepted that while some teachers were really neutral towards students, others had some positive or negative attitudes towards students. Respondent 1 (R1) cited that: *“While I grade the students according to the rubric, some other teachers do not employ rubric, they just grade students from their mind.”*

Apart from the grading procedure, teachers also complained about the rubrics. They agreed that the rubric is not detailed enough. Respondent 2 (R2) stated that:

*“The rubric is not proper for our students since it is not stressing all of the important areas for us, and it also causes unfair grading”.*

While Teachers complained about the grading and rubrics, they were happy with conducting the exam by double examiner in terms of ensuring objectivity in class (though not among classes), and sharing responsibilities. R2 cited that:

*“Although there are subjectivity issues among classes, having a double examiner in a class is preferable for the reliability of the scores in a class. Also, it is good because one of the examiners takes notes, and the other asks questions.”*

#### *Theme 2: Teaching Strategies*

Among the responses, it was seen that all of the teachers believe that there is a mismatch between exam tasks and classroom practices. They are of the opinion that students are not conducting parallel practices to exam tasks. They think that students need to get exact strategies to employ them in the exams. Respondent 3 (R3) underlined that:

*“It is not realistic to expect students’ higher exam performance, because we are not teaching them the exact strategies or skills. Our expectations from students and classroom practices overlap.”*

#### *Theme 3: Exam Duration*

There is a consensus among teachers in terms of the fairness and sufficiency of the time allocated for each student. Respondent 5 (R5) stated that:

*“We are not strict about the time, we are trying to be flexible and wait till students finish their words.”*

The teachers were all consented to the timing. They believe that they do not hurry up and push the students to answer the questions quickly. It is also stated by one of the male teachers that time is allocated in accordance with the difficulty level of the question. R5 informed that:

*“I give longer time and present clarification if the question is a little bit complex, but if it is easy, I just skip to the next questions without asking any extra questions.”*

#### *Theme 4: Speech Anxiety*

Speech anxiety was repetitively stressed by the teachers as the debilitating factor. According to the participant teacher, students were affected from the debilitating dimension of the speech anxiety which largely decreased their performance in the exam in turn. Respondent 4 (R4) asserted that:

*“In the exam cause of consideration of being graded, students’ anxiety increases and this blocks their performance”*

However, there were some teachers who believe that speech anxiety may trigger students to rehearse more before the exam, and this can be facilitative for the students. R3 claimed that:

*“Since students are afraid of getting low on exams, they practice a lot before the exams. So, speech anxiety fosters their learning.”*

#### *Theme 5: Exam Proposal*

Although teachers stated some positive parts of the available oral exam style, they mostly mentioned the discomfort in terms of subjectivity, mismatch of the exam tasks and classroom practices, and speech

anxiety. They had some proposals for a new oral exam style ranging from strategy teaching, adoption of visual aids, and question types to speech anxiety. R5 proposed that:

*“I believe that if there is more interaction between students in the exam, students will feel less anxious. So, we should take students into the class in pairs instead of one by one, and ask them to develop a dialogue among the given topics. In this way, students may think that making mistakes is normal when they observe that their friends are also making mistakes”*

Teachers approached the issue by utilizing visual aids to make students speak more with low anxiety levels. R4 cited that:

*“Providing students with pictures or a piece from a movie may give students a clue about the question, and even decreases their excitement level.”*

Employing different types of questions was among the suggestions of the teachers for the new oral exam style. They assured me that the exam should be more than just an interview-based exam. R3 and R4 stated that:

*“Our existing exam is only one-way transmission based, like in the interviews, but we need to employ reading aloud parts, picture description, and even storytelling.” (R3)*

*“In addition to warm-up and interview based (responsive questions) it can be beneficial to have pair tasks.” (R4)*

There were suggestions related to the subjectivity issue for the new exam style. (R5) suggested that:

*“It is wise to employ a video recorder or tape recorder in order to double check and give the final score at the end of this double-check (one in the classroom immediately after the exam, the other is after watching or listening to the records.”*

It was revealed that teachers were looking forward to a communicative oral exam style, as it was already studied in the classes and that would enable the students to develop a dialogue thanks to some clues and feel free. The communicative (pair task) style exam was aimed to show students that it is normal to make mistakes by observing their friends in the exams. When students see that their friends are also making mistakes, they would perceive that making mistakes is normal. So it may help students to decrease their anxiety or convert existing anxiety to facilitative anxiety. In addition to this, teachers also pointed out that assessment should be conducted for the sake of learning, not for the sake of grading (assessing for learning).

### **Interviews with students:**

Students' interviews were coded, and four final themes were reached at the end. It is beneficial to state that students' themes were nearly parallel to the teachers' themes as shown in table 4 below (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Themes and Frequencies of the Codes from Students' Interviews

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Codes with Frequencies</b>	
Standardization	Unfair Grading (12)	Fear of unfamiliar teachers (11)
Timing-Question type	Equal breakdown of questions (5)	Equal allocated time for students (8)

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Anxiety	Provoked by unfamiliar teachers (10)	Increased anxiety by unhelpful and unfriendly teachers (19)
Exam Proposal	Pleased with the available questions (5)	Video / audio recording of the exams (7)

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### *Theme 1: Standardization*

In line with the teacher interviews, it was concluded from students' interviews that students also complained about the imbalanced grading. Students underlined that exam grading was unfair, while on the one hand, some classes' average scores were really high, on the other hand, another class's average exam score is really low, though the proficiency level of all the classes are same. This refers standardization problem to a large extend. Interviewee 1 (I1) said that:

“Although my friend’s proficiency level is lower than me her score is higher, also all of the students’, in the next class, exam scores are higher than our class, but their proficiency level is not better than us”

Students also stressed that unfamiliar teachers also affect the grading process. While conducting exams with unfamiliar teachers is beneficial to be neutral towards students, sometimes it is not favored by students, since teachers are not knowledgeable about the students’ classroom performance. Interviewee 3 (I3) reported that:

“Although it is good that teachers do not know anything about us, so they are neutral towards us, but sometimes it is helpful. Since teachers may try to help you speak more or knows whether you have speech handicap or not.”

### *Theme 2: Timing and Question Type*

Students all reported their comfort with the sufficient timing of the exam. They stated that questions difficulty level and given time is balanced. According to the replies of the students, they were not in rush when replying to the questions. Interviewee 5 (I5) informed that:

“We are given enough time for each question, the time is not long or short. That is why we feel relaxed in terms of timing.”

Students also informed about their consent with the difficulty level of the questions. Interviewee 4 (I4) said that:

“Also, there is a balance among the question types. We are asked questions from easier ones to the harder ones in order”

### *Theme 3: Speech Anxiety*

Teachers complained about unfamiliar teachers again, but from the perspective of speech anxiety in this time. Students all agreed that being examined by unfamiliar teachers provoked their anxiety. They thought that unfamiliar teacher may not understand them properly or they cannot understand the unfamiliar teachers’ pronunciation. Interviewee 3 (I3) informed that:

“I am afraid of not understanding the words of the teachers, as I did not hear their pronunciation before. This issue increase my anxiety and I generally perform worse in the exams than in the classroom tasks”

Teachers’ attitude was among the anxiety provoking factors. Students informed that most of the time teachers are not student-friendly in the exams. They do not try to decrease students’ anxiety. Interviewee 2 (I2) reported that:

*“Teachers do not smile, sometimes some of the teachers even laugh at our answers. We felt that we were belittled. They should be friendlier.” (I2)*

#### *Theme 4: Exam Proposal*

Teachers' and students' opinions in terms of available oral exam styles overlap. While teachers were not totally pleased with the existing oral exam style, students consented with the existing oral exam style except for standardization and anxiety-provoking items aforementioned in theme 3. Students were comfortable with the question types and interview-based oral exam styles. Interviewee 1 (I1) said that:

*“Existing oral exam style is quite satisfactory. I would feel more anxious if we were examined in pairs because my partner's performance would affect me negatively. I am also a shy person, I do not want to be examined by my classmates.”*

Since students were not pleased with the grading of the examinees, their suggestion was in line with the issue of bringing objectivity. They were of the opinion that the available exam style was in short of objectivity. That was why their concern was to ensure a standardized grading procedure.

*“I do not believe that teachers are objective. That is why our responses should be graded twice. Video recordings or audio recordings are the best options to grade our speeches later on. Recordings can be listened to by the same examiner or another one and the immediate grading and late grading can be cross-checked.”*

Students thought that adopting digital tools for recording exams and evaluating them later may bring objectivity.

### **OVERALL FINDINGS**

It is visible that most of the teachers' responses were parallel to students' responses except for some points: available exam style and teachers' attitudes towards students. While teachers were in the opinion that double examiners bring more reliable grading conditions, students felt insecure as they were not familiar with the two teachers. From the point of teacher attitudes, the two participant groups' responses were conflicting since teachers thought that they had already been demonstrating positive attitudes towards students; while some students asserted that they have some strict teachers influencing their performance badly.

On the one hand, teachers were in favor of utilizing pair tasks to have communicative assessment to decrease the students' anxiety. On the other hand, students thought that pair tasks in the exams might cause debilitating anxiety on them.

#### **Findings Regarding the Research Questions**

##### **1. What do the instructors /students think about the existing speaking exam process and its effects on speaking anxiety?**

It was revealed from the interviews that while teachers consented to the breakdown of the questions, timing, and placing double examiner, they were not pleased with the exam style thoroughly. Since it was deprived of communicative question types. Also, teachers thought that the existing exam style had a kind of debilitating anxiety as it was interview-based (one-way transmission).

From the students' perspective, students were pleased with the exam style, as they thought communicative tasks would bring more burden on them, and might increase their anxiety. They complained about the unfairness of the grading part of the exam. They claimed that it was not objective, as in the issue of teachers' attitudes.

##### **a) Is there a relation between oral exam style and speaking anxiety?**

According to the responses of the participants, it is possible to mention a relationship between oral exam style and speaking anxiety. While teachers were of the opinion that communication (dialogue, discussion, etc.) based exam style would decrease the students' anxiety, students were in the vice-versa opinion. So, it is probable to talk about the direct relation between exam style and speaking anxiety either debilitating or facilitative depending on the participants' point of view.

**b) If so, what would be the most appropriate speaking exam procedure to decrease the students' oral exam anxiety in the context of the study?**

When the responses of both groups are combined, a new oral exam style that would please both parties can be reached. According to the responses of the participants, the favorable oral exam style can be communication-based but also includes responsive parts (interviews). The suggested modal is as in the following: Students would go into the classroom in pairs;

- first: have warm-up questions (not graded),
- second: responsive questions
- third: reading aloud parts (for assessing pronunciation)
- fourth: In the last part, there would be a pair task reflected on the board with prompts and pictures; and require students to develop a dialogue on it.

The first three parts would be done individually. Each student would answer the questions in turn separately. Teachers would record it through the camera, and exams would be first graded in the classroom immediately after examinees go out, and secondly would be graded after watching the records again. So, teachers would reach reliability after double grading.

- Reliability would be provided together with pair tasks
- Anxiety would decrease
- There would be both interview-based questions (warm-up and responsive questions) and communicative questions (pair tasks).
- A new detailed rubric would be prepared to include new
- aspects (communication, attitudes, etc.).

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, a summary of the study is given at the first step and then, the results are discussed within related literature. Finally, suggestions and implications are displayed.

### *Summary of the Study*

The oral exam style of the Prep School was chosen as the case since some problems were detected in the available oral exam style. There were complaints about the oral exam from both teachers and students sides. So the aim of the study was to understand the reasons for the discomfort with the oral exam style and share the results of the study with the oral exam commission to develop a more satisfactory version. In accordance with this, interviews were held with 5 teachers and 5 students, the content of their responses was analyzed, and findings were reached.

### **Discussion**

Considering the subjective nature of performance assessments, the biggest obstacle to speaking skill testing is assuring reliability. Oral exams are troublesome in part because of their subjectivity, as Ur (1996) pointed out. Corresponding to these worries, recent research has emphasized the necessity of

standard operating procedures in order to enhance reliability. Sak (2008) states that rating scales and rubrics should be appropriately designed, examiners should receive sufficient training, and rater dependability should be guaranteed in order to reduce inconsistencies. Liu (2006), on the other hand, presents an alternative viewpoint, contending that because of inherent human variability, it is impractical to anticipate the same outcomes from several assessments. According to Liu, it is crucial to recognize that "reliability is not measured; it is estimated" (Sak, 2008, p. 21) even though aiming for consistency is critical. This suggests that although reaching perfect consistency in scores is unattainable, efforts should be focused on making tests more similar. This opinion is supported by recent research, which indicates that while thorough training and sound rubric design can improve speaking test reliability, perfect uniformity in results is still unachievable.

A new oral exam format that incorporates instructor and student preferences can help alleviate a number of issues with anxiety, dependability, and fairness. The significance of developing assessment environments that lessen anxiety while upholding strict evaluation standards has been highlighted by recent study (Horwitz, 2021). Exam formats that emphasize communication and include both individual and pair work can successfully strike a balance between these demands.

The suggested exam format, which starts with warm-up questions that are not assessed, can lessen test-day anxiety and provide a relaxed atmosphere (Zhou et al., 2022). While reading aloud portions might explicitly target pronunciation skills, response questions enable the examination of students' spontaneous speaking abilities, guaranteeing a thorough assessment of a variety of language competencies (Chen & Liu, 2023).

Pair projects that include pictures and prompts promote genuine conversation and teamwork, two essential elements of language use in everyday situations (Wang & Chen, 2023). Because instantaneous grading followed by a second review can eliminate biases and errors, recording and double-grading the tests improves dependability (Li et al., 2021).

Moreover, integrating both interview-based and communicative tasks aligns with recent educational trends that advocate for a more holistic approach to language assessment (Kim & Kim, 2023). The development of a detailed rubric that includes aspects like communication and attitudes will provide clearer guidelines and expectations for both examiners and students, fostering a fairer and more transparent assessment process (Zhang et al., 2022).

Administering speaking exams poses significant challenges, particularly when testing a large number of students. The logistical demands, including the time required, the need for multiple examiners, and the associated administrative costs, can be overwhelming for schools with limited teaching staff. Recent studies corroborate these issues, emphasizing the strain on resources and the impracticality of large-scale speaking assessments (Smith & Johnson, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). Moreover, to address student anxiety and improve performance, it is crucial to train students according to exam expectations and familiarize them with task descriptions and grading criteria. This preparation helps reduce anxiety and improves performance during exams (Brown et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers should be aware that even advanced speakers can experience speaking anxiety (Horwitz et al., 2023), and they should adopt a supportive and understanding approach to mitigate this issue. These findings highlight the need for efficient exam administration strategies and comprehensive student preparation to ensure effective and fair speaking assessments.

In conclusion, the suggested oral exam style reflects current best practices in language assessment research and tackles important difficulties by combining complete evaluation criteria, reduced anxiety, and reliability. To continue enhancing EFL instruction, more research may examine the model's long-term effects on confidence and performance in students.



## SUGGESTIONS

The findings of this research have broad significance for both domestic and global settings, emphasizing the relevance and universality of treating speech anxiety and improving oral exam techniques. In line with Liu's (2006) findings, the study emphasizes the sensitivity of oral exam forms and their effect on speaking anxiety. From the viewpoints of the participants, the study provides helpful answers by outlining the current state of affairs and its underlying reasons. It is imperative to acknowledge the inherent limitation of generalizability that exists in case studies. This necessitates more investigation to pinpoint precise anxiety reduction techniques as well as the best oral exam formats for various educational contexts.

Institutions might use these findings to customize oral evaluation procedures to lower anxiety and improve performance in local circumstances. This could entail creating uniform and transparent grading guidelines, providing examiners with training, and incorporating student input into the exam design process. By putting these tactics into practice, assessments can become more fair and dependable, which will enhance student performance and happiness.

The study's implications hold equal significance in global situations. Global educational systems stand to gain from a better comprehension of the relationship between oral exam types and speaking anxiety. Researchers and educators can exchange best practices and create standardized methods that take language and cultural variances into account by using a global viewpoint. Working together can create a more encouraging learning atmosphere, lessen the stress associated with exams, and advance language competency generally.

The study recommends mixed-methods research as a methodological approach to validate qualitative findings using quantitative data, including self-reports. With a more thorough understanding of the connection between speaking anxiety and exam styles, this method can help with the creation of focused therapies. Expanding the sample size and diversity will help future studies produce reliable and broadly applicable results.

Through addressing these consequences, educational institutions can develop more inclusive and effective oral evaluation procedures, which will eventually improve students' global learning experiences.

## LIMITATIONS

There are always limitations in a study that the researchers have little or no control over the variables. The concerned study is a descriptive case study, and the results are specific to the context of the study. Also, convenience sampling was employed in the study in order to have the economy of time and effort as the researcher is already employed in the context of the study. As a result of the aforementioned issue, the generalizability issue is the general limitation of the study. That's why it may not have a large-scale impact on the field.

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