



## A Scoping Review of Speaking Anxiety among Turkish EFL Learners

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### Abstract

Speaking anxiety is a well-documented barrier to language acquisition, particularly in EFL contexts. This scoping review synthesizes 14 studies focusing on speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL learners to identify its underlying causes and effective intervention strategies. The analysis reveals that psychological factors (e.g., fear of negative evaluation), linguistic limitations, and socio-cultural dynamics significantly contribute to anxiety. Additionally, the review examines the efficacy of pedagogical adjustments and technology-driven solutions in alleviating speaking anxiety. Findings underscore the importance of integrating psychological and instructional support to foster communicative confidence. This study contributes to the growing body of research on language learning anxiety, offering practical implications for educators and policymakers.

**Keywords:** Foreign language speaking anxiety, negative evaluation, Linguistic Deficiencies

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### Introduction

Speaking anxiety is a prevalent challenge among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, often hindering their ability to communicate effectively in the target language. This issue is particularly pronounced among Turkish EFL learners, who may experience heightened anxiety due to factors such as limited exposure to authentic communication settings, fear of negative evaluation, and sociocultural influences on language learning. Understanding the scope of speaking anxiety in this context is essential for educators, policymakers, and researchers aiming to develop effective strategies to enhance learners' speaking confidence.

This scoping review seeks to synthesize existing research on speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL learners, identifying key findings, theoretical perspectives, and pedagogical implications. By mapping out previous studies in this field, this review will provide a comprehensive overview of the factors contributing to speaking anxiety and potential interventions that may alleviate its impact. The findings will offer valuable insights for both theoretical discussions and practical applications in English language teaching, ultimately contributing to a more supportive and anxiety-free learning environment.

### Review of the related literature

Ongoing research in this field broadens the understanding and interpretation of anxiety in language learning, with a particular focus on its impact on speaking skills. Speaking anxiety in language learning is the discomfort, fear, or unease that learners feel when they need to communicate in a second or foreign language. It is typically associated with worries about making errors, facing criticism, or having difficulty conveying ideas effectively. This anxiety can impair fluency, reduce confidence, and limit engagement in speaking tasks, ultimately affecting language development. MacIntyre and Gardner (1993) described speaking anxiety as a personal sense of tension and unease that arises in foreign language settings, encompassing activities such as speaking, listening, and learning.

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Horwitz *et al.* (1986), as the pioneering researchers on anxiety in language learning, examine speaking anxiety within the broader concept of foreign language anxiety. They define this as “a unique combination of self-perceptions, emotions, and behaviors linked to classroom language learning, stemming from the distinctive nature of the language acquisition process” (p.127). Resting upon some empirical data and background evidence, they develop a theory on language learning anxiety. This foreign language anxiety theory has three interrelated components; communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Communication apprehension is defined by Horwitz *et al.* (1986) as “a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people” (p. 127). Fear of negative evaluation means “apprehension about others’ evaluation, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (p. 128). Finally, test anxiety includes the tests and examinations during language learning and refers to “a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure” (p. 128).

Öztürk (2009) explored the extent, underlying factors, and student perceptions of foreign language speaking anxiety within a Turkish EFL context. Quantitative findings indicated that students generally experienced low levels of speaking anxiety. However, interviews revealed that many students viewed speaking as a primary source of anxiety. Key contributing factors included pronunciation concerns, unexpected questions, fear of making mistakes, and apprehension about negative evaluation. Additionally, gender appeared to be a significant factor in speaking anxiety, with female students perceiving speaking in a foreign language as particularly stressful.

Çağatay (2015) <sup>[4]</sup> examined foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) among METU preparatory students, revealing moderate anxiety levels, with female students experiencing higher stress and increased anxiety when speaking with native speakers. According to her, to reduce FLSA, educators should create supportive environments, use indirect praise, and encourage real-life communication through projects, social interactions, and exchange programs. Addressing gender differences and promoting intercultural communicative competence can help students gain confidence and improve their speaking skills.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) identify three distinct perspectives on anxiety: trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is a general predisposition to feel anxious across different situations. State anxiety refers to the temporary, immediate experience of anxiety in a particular moment. Situation-specific anxiety describes a recurring pattern of anxiety that consistently emerges in a specific context over time.

Young (1992) suggests that speaking is likely the most anxiety-inducing skill among the four language skills, both for foreign language teachers and learners. While extensive research has been conducted on anxiety in oral production (Sellers, 2000), only a limited number of studies have examined its underlying causes (Kitano, 2001). Kitano identifies two key factors contributing to foreign language speaking anxiety: a fear of negative evaluation as a personality trait and an individual’s self-perception of their speaking ability in the target language.

Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013) investigated the gender effect on anxiety and the results of quantitative data presented that

there was a significant difference between genders in terms of speaking anxiety that they experience since male learners’ speaking anxiety level found out to be lower than female learners, and the qualitative data obtained from interview questions supported the quantitative data. Results of this study indicated similar results to Balemir (2009) revealing that female students were more anxious while speaking English, so they experienced higher level of speaking anxiety than male students.

Kasap and Power (2019) <sup>[10]</sup> examined how foreign language speaking anxiety is experienced by students and observed by teachers in English-speaking classes, as well as its impact on language production and participation. Findings revealed that anxiety manifests through discomfort, self-esteem issues, and physical symptoms, while teachers noted visible distress, avoidance behaviors, and disrupted speech. Both students and teachers reported that anxiety hindered language fluency, participation, and class dynamics, affecting lesson pace, motivation, and organization. Despite these challenges, students still found value in speaking classes. Given its significant impact, the study emphasizes the need for research and classroom interventions to manage speaking anxiety and enhance language learning outcomes.

Dalkılıç (2001) found a strong link between speaking anxiety and student performance, with factors like low confidence, shyness, and high expectations contributing to anxiety. While some students remained silent or struggled in oral exams, those with lower anxiety used strategies like self-encouragement, preparation, and positive self-talk. The study emphasized the instructor’s role in creating a supportive environment and suggested workshops, discussions, and advance lesson topics to help students manage their anxiety effectively.

## Methodology

This study employs a scoping review approach to systematically examine the existing literature on speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL learners. Following the framework proposed by Arksey and O’Malley (2005), this review follows a transparent and replicable process to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant studies. The inclusion criteria were established to focus on research conducted within the Turkish EFL context, specifically addressing speaking anxiety.

Only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and dissertations published in English were considered.

To identify relevant literature, a systematic search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and ResearchGate, using keywords such as "speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL learners," "foreign language anxiety in Turkey," and "EFL speaking difficulties in Turkish learners." Additional sources were identified through reference tracking.

After an initial screening of abstracts and full-text reviews, 14 studies met the inclusion criteria and were selected for analysis. These studies varied in their methodologies, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches, with data collected through instruments such as questionnaires (e.g., the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale), interviews, classroom observations, and experimental interventions. The data extraction process focused on identifying key aspects such as participant

demographics, proficiency levels, learning contexts, and the main factors contributing to speaking anxiety.

### Data Analysis

Content analysis was employed to systematically examine and interpret the findings of the selected studies, focusing on recurring patterns and key insights related to speaking anxiety. The analysis involved identifying, categorizing, and

comparing factors contributing to speaking anxiety, including psychological influences, instructional methods, and sociocultural aspects. By synthesizing these studies, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Turkish EFL learners in developing speaking skills while also highlighting pedagogical implications and potential strategies for reducing anxiety in language classrooms.

**Table 1:** Scoping Review Table

No	Authors and year	Title	Research Method	Instruments	Participants
1	Karatas, Alci, Bademcioglu, Ergin, 2016	An Investigation into University Students' Foreign Language	Quantitative	Questionnaire	488 Anatolian High school students
2	Yalçın, İnceçay, 2014	Foreign language speaking anxiety The case of spontaneous	Mixed method	Focus group interview Open-ended essay questions	12 Turkish freshman
3	Çağtay, 2015	Examining EFL students' foreign language speaking anxiety	Quantitative	Questionnaire	147 preparatory program students of a state university
4	Saltan, 2003 (M.A thesis)	EFL speaking anxiety: how do students and teachers perceive it?	Mixed method	Questionnaire	100 Turkish EFL students and 7 teachers
5	Subaşı, 2010	What are the Main Sources of Turkish EFL Students' Anxiety	Mixed method	Survey 15 interviews	55 ELT students of Anadolu university
6	HÖL, Kasımi, 2022	A growing dilemma English speaking anxiety-in-EFL classrooms A review	Systematic review	Research study	59 researches
7	Akkuş, 2021	Research Perspectives on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety in Turkish EFL Context A Systematic Review	Mixed method	Meta-synthesis	24 qualitative studies
8	Tekir, 2021	Dealing with Turkish EFL learners' speaking anxiety	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	20 Turkish students of a preparatory program at a state university
9	Kasap, Power, 2019 [10]	Anxiety in the EFL Speaking Classrooms	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	5 Students
10	Ölmezler-Öztürk, Öztürk, 2021 [15]	Reducing Speaking Anxiety in EFL Classrooms	Mixed method	Questionnaire, focus group	52 freshman
11	Tercan, Dikilitaş, 2015	EFL students' speaking anxiety a case from tertiary level students	Quantitative	Questionnaire	159 students of a private university
12	Kara, Ayaz,Dündar, 2017	Challenges in EFL Speaking Classes in Turkish Context	Mixed method	Questionnaire and interview	66 students of preparatory program
13	Öztürk, Gürbüz, 2014 [14]	Speaking anxiety among Turkish EFL learners The case at a state university	Mixed method	Questionnaire and interview	383 students of preparatory program at a state university
14	Tüm, Kunt, 2013	Speaking Anxiety among EFL Student Teachers	Mixed method	Questionnaire and interview	131 student teachers

### Results

This section synthesizes findings from the discussion and conclusion sections of the reviewed studies, highlighting the major causes, effects, and potential interventions for foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). The studies reveal that speaking anxiety is a multifaceted issue influenced by psychological, linguistic, and social factors. Its effects extend beyond classroom performance, impacting learners' long-term ability to communicate in a foreign language. This synthesis will discuss the recurring themes across the studies, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

### Key themes and findings

#### Fear of negative evaluation

A dominant factor contributing to FLSA is the fear of negative evaluation (Article 2, 5, 9). Students often worry about being judged by their peers and instructors, which leads to heightened self-consciousness and reluctance to participate

in speaking activities (Article 6, 11). Studies indicate that learners are particularly anxious about making pronunciation and grammatical errors, fearing that these mistakes will result in social embarrassment (Article 3, 8). This anxiety is more pronounced in teacher-centered classrooms, where students perceive instructors as authoritative figures whose approval or criticism significantly affects their confidence (Article 7, 12). Peer interactions also play a role, as some learners feel intimidated by classmates who appear more fluent, further discouraging participation (Article 10, 13).

#### Low self-confidence and linguistic deficiencies

Closely linked to the fear of negative evaluation is low self-confidence, which arises when students believe they lack the necessary skills to communicate effectively (Article 1, 6, 14). Many students enter the classroom with preconceived notions that they are not "good" at speaking, leading to self-fulfilling cycles of avoidance and poor performance (Article 9). Linguistic deficiencies, including limited vocabulary, weak

pronunciation skills, and difficulties with grammar, further reinforce this lack of confidence (Article 3, 8, 11). Research shows that when learners struggle with word retrieval or sentence formation, they experience cognitive overload, making real-time conversation even more difficult (Article 5, 12). Some students, fearing they will not be understood, prefer to remain silent rather than risk making a mistake (Article 7, 10). Over time, this avoidance behavior hinders oral proficiency development, making speaking even more stressful in future situations (Article 2, 13).

### **Cognitive and behavioral effects of anxiety**

Speaking anxiety not only affects learners' emotions but also interferes with cognitive processes, disrupting fluency and coherence (Article 1, 6, 12). High-anxiety students experience mental blocks where they forget words mid-sentence or struggle to process feedback in real time (Article 8, 10). Research suggests that anxiety affects working memory capacity, making it harder for learners to construct grammatically accurate and meaningful responses (Article 3, 11). As a result, students often resort to shortened answers, rehearsed speech, or complete silence as coping mechanisms (Article 2, 9). Beyond cognitive effects, behavioral avoidance strategies are also prevalent, with students deliberately choosing back-row seating, volunteering less frequently, or relying on written communication instead of spoken interactions (Article 7, 14). Long-term studies indicate that learners who frequently avoid speaking opportunities develop weaker oral skills and may struggle with real-world communication, even after years of language instruction (Article 5, 13).

### **Creating a Positive and Non-Threatening Classroom Atmosphere**

Several studies propose classroom interventions to reduce speaking anxiety, with a primary emphasis on creating a supportive and encouraging learning environment (Article 1, 6, 8). Teachers can foster a non-threatening classroom atmosphere by normalizing mistakes and shifting the focus from accuracy to communication (Article 9, 12). Some researchers highlight the benefits of humor, relaxed interactions, and peer collaboration, which make speaking activities less intimidating (Article 5, 11). Small-group and pair work have been found to be particularly effective in reducing pressure and allowing students to practice in a low-stakes environment (Article 3, 10). Studies also suggest that gradual exposure to speaking tasks—starting with structured exercises like role-plays before moving to free speech—helps learners build confidence over time (Article 7, 14).

### **Technology-Based Interventions**

In recent years, technology has emerged as a powerful tool for reducing FLSA, providing learners with low-pressure speaking opportunities (Article 2, 4, 9). AI-based language applications, such as chatbots and speech recognition tools, allow students to practice pronunciation and fluency in private, minimizing the fear of peer judgment (Article 6, 10). Several studies have explored virtual reality (VR) simulations, which place students in realistic conversational settings where they can practice speaking without the anxiety associated with face-to-face interactions (Article 5, 12). Asynchronous speaking platforms, where students record responses instead of speaking in real-time, have also been

identified as effective for gradually building confidence (Article 8, 11). These digital interventions offer flexible, self-paced alternatives that help learners develop fluency before engaging in live conversations.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings from the reviewed studies emphasize that foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) remains a major psychological barrier in second language acquisition, affecting learners' participation, confidence, and overall communicative competence. A recurring theme across the literature is the fear of negative evaluation, which leads to self-consciousness and avoidance behaviors. Many learners hesitate to speak due to concerns about grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and peer judgment, ultimately limiting their opportunities for oral practice. Additionally, low self-confidence and linguistic deficiencies further exacerbate anxiety, as students struggle with vocabulary recall, sentence construction, and real-time speech processing. The cognitive overload caused by speaking anxiety disrupts fluency and coherence, reinforcing a cycle where anxious learners perform poorly, leading to even greater apprehension in future speaking tasks.

To mitigate the impact of FLSA, the reviewed studies propose several pedagogical interventions, with a particular emphasis on creating a positive and non-threatening classroom environment. Teachers who normalize mistakes, prioritize communicative competence over grammatical precision, and implement collaborative learning activities can help students develop confidence. Group and pair work reduce the pressure of public speaking, while structured speaking exercises gradually expose learners to more spontaneous speech. Technology-assisted interventions have also been highlighted as effective tools for lowering anxiety, particularly asynchronous speaking activities, virtual reality simulations, and AI-based speech recognition tools. These methods allow students to practice without the immediate pressure of real-time evaluation, making language learning more accessible and less stressful.

However, despite the growing interest in technology-enhanced language learning, none of the reviewed studies have explored the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in addressing FLSA. AI-powered learning environments offer adaptive, individualized feedback, allowing learners to practice speaking in low-risk settings while receiving real-time pronunciation and fluency assessments. Chatbots, automated speech analysis, and virtual tutors could provide valuable support for language learners, reducing their reliance on human evaluation and gradually building their confidence. Given the rapid advancements in AI-driven educational tools, future research should investigate their potential in reducing speaking anxiety and fostering oral proficiency development.

Overall, the studies suggest that FLSA is a complex phenomenon influenced by psychological, linguistic, and social factors. While various classroom-based and technology-supported strategies have shown promising results, a more learner-centered and flexible approach is necessary to accommodate individual differences in anxiety levels. Educators must adopt multimodal teaching methods that integrate both traditional speaking exercises and digital solutions, ensuring that students receive comprehensive, anxiety-reducing support. Future research should continue to



explore innovative pedagogical frameworks, including AI-driven interventions, to help learners overcome their fears, enhance their speaking confidence, and develop real-world communication skills in a foreign language.

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