Factors affecting students' speaking anxiety in English language classroom

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ABSTRACT

In today's world, it is obvious that learning English is not just memorizing words or grammar rules. There is an increasing importance attributed to communicative English. Speaking, one of the four basic language skills, is considered extremely necessary for learners to use the target language effectively. However, anxiety in speaking classes is seen as a major obstacle for language learners' performance and communicative competence. The aim of this study is to identify whether the high school students' foreign language speaking anxiety has significant differences in terms of their gender, grade level, self-perceived English level, receiving any special support for speaking, and their English exam scores. A Likert type scale was administered to 250 students studying at a state high school in the fall semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. According to the findings, it was seen that they had a moderate level of anxiety. Moreover, it was seen that there was no statistically significant difference between students' foreign language speaking anxiety level and having received special speaking support before. However, students' genders, grade levels, English scores in the previous year, and their self-perceived English level were found to be effective on foreign language speaking anxiety.

Introduction

Our world is more globalized than ever before, thanks to factors such as advances in communication, technology, and transportation. People have become capable of communicating with each other much faster and easier, regardless of time and place. Language serves as the sole factor that can either facilitate or hinder effective interaction among people from diverse backgrounds worldwide. Therefore, learning a language has become more important than ever before. In Turkey, language classes are frequently deemed insufficient for developing communicative abilities in foreign language learning, as they tend to prioritize memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules, rather than emphasizing the enhancement of effective communication skills (Alptekin & Tatar, 2011; Kara et al., 2017; Koral & Mirici, 2021; Sevingil, 2008; Zerey, 2008). Although it is known that there are many obstacles in front of students to develop their communicative language skills, students' psychological attitudes towards language learning such as motivation and self-esteem, are the leading ones. According to Arnold and Brown (1999), the way individuals perceive themselves and their abilities can

either facilitate or impede their language learning journey. They argue that the unique characteristics of learners play a crucial role in the overall process of acquiring a second language. Similarly, Dörnyei (2005) stated that foreign language students' affective differences are the reason for poor language attitudes, and low motivation in the L2 classroom.

One of the characteristics that affect learning is anxiety, although it is unclear if anxiety is a personality issue, an emotional response to a circumstance, or a combination of both (Gass & Selinker, 2008). According to Arnold and Brown's (1999) assertion, anxiety emerges as a major hindrance in the language learning process. They emphasized that this emotional state is frequently linked to adverse feelings such as nervousness, anger, self-doubt, apprehension, and tension.

Many researchers reported that the majority of pupils appeared helpless with decreasing their anxiety level when speaking English in class (Liu, 2007; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Thus, researchers in this field agree that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking of all four skills in language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu, 2007; Rafek et al., 2013; Young, 1991). Dörnyei (2005) noted that the presence of anxiety in a learning environment often leads to a decline in our comprehension of the second language (L2).

However, although it is extremely important for students' language development, there is no consensus on the sources or factors influencing the levels of speech anxiety. When the literature in Turkish context was investigated, it was seen that the studies on the speech anxiety of L2 students generally focus on tertiary level students (Balemir, 2009; Debreli & Demirkan, 2015; Karataş et al., 2016; Takkaç Tulgar, 2018; Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2016), and the studies on high school students focus on a specific grade level and ignore others (Kındığılı, 2022; Mestan, 2017; Yılmaz, 2019). This study, on the other hand, addresses high school students from all grade levels of high school and aims to determine whether there is any significant difference among grade levels. Moreover, while the importance of speaking skills in language learning is recognized, there is a lack of extensive exploration on the specific impact of anxiety on students' performance and communicative competence in this particular context. By examining variations in speaking anxiety levels based on factors such as gender, grade level, self-perceived English proficiency, receiving special support for speaking, and English exam scores, this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing speaking anxiety among high school students. Consequently, it contributes to the existing literature by deepening our understanding of the complexities surrounding foreign language speaking anxiety in this demographic and offers potential strategies for educators and policymakers to effectively address this issue.

Anxiety

Although the subject of this article is the foreign language speaking anxiety of students in the English language classroom, it would be useful to mention what anxiety means in psychology in general. Rachman (2004) described anxiety as "the tense, disturbing expectation of a threatening but uncertain event; an uneasy feeling of tension" (p. 3). While fear and anxiety are often used interchangeably, it is crucial to recognize significant distinctions between the two. Fear typically arises from a discernible source and signifies a reaction to a specific danger, such as encountering a snake. On the other hand, anxiety frequently emerges without a clearly identifiable cause, being characterized by uncertainty, unpredictability, or a lack of control (Rachman, 2004). In a similar vein, Spielberger (1972) defined anxiety as an unpleasant

emotional state or condition characterized by changes in the nervous system and subjective feelings of stress, uneasiness, and fear (p. 45).

Facilitative and Debilitative Anxiety

Although researchers and scientists used negative connotations such as unpleasant or disturbing while defining anxiety in psychology, it has a distinction in educational contexts: facilitative and debilitative anxiety. To simply put into words, they can be named helpful and harmful anxiety, respectively.

In the dictionary of the American Psychological Association, "facilitative anxiety" is defined as a level of anxiety that a person (such as a musician or an athlete) perceives as aiding performance (2022). In debilitative anxiety, on the other hand, anxiety is perceived as interfering the performance. In the facilitative anxiety level, learner is able to see the stressor as a challenge or opportunity to accomplish. If negative emotions such as fear or threat are attributed to the situation, then it can lead the learner to failure. According to Strack and Esteves (2014), the way we approach and think about our feelings plays a significant role in shaping various outcomes related to anxiety. As researchers suggest, a given situation can be perceived as either a challenge or an opportunity that facilitates learning. However, it can also be viewed as a threat, hindrance, or obstacle to the learner, depending on their individual perception of the event.

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Parallel to the definitions mentioned above and as a subcategory of anxiety, foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a psychological condition specific to language learning environments and especially to language classes where students are in groups. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) provide a specific definition to distinguish foreign language anxiety from general anxiety. They describe foreign language anxiety as the apprehension that individuals experience when they are faced with a situation that necessitates the use of a second language in which they have not yet achieved proficiency. When we look at the other definitions of and discussions about foreign language anxiety, we see that negative expressions such as stress, nervousness, emotional reaction, and worry are frequently used for the emotional state of the student (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999; Young, 1990; Zheng & Cheng, 2018).

The sources, types, and effects of anxiety in the foreign language learning process, which are very prone to be affected by emotional factors, have not been fully determined yet. As a result of her research on the possible causes of foreign language anxiety, Young (1991) listed a total of six reasons arising from the learner, from the teacher, and from the educational practices. She claims that personal and interpersonal anxieties, learner misconceptions about language acquisition, teacher misconceptions about language instruction, teacher-student relations, classroom practices, and language testing all contribute to language anxiety (p. 427).

Horwitz et al. (1986) talk about three types of performance anxiety in language classrooms, first of which is communication apprehension. McCroskey (1978) defined it as a person's level of fear or anxiety related to actual or anticipated communication with other people. According to McCroskey, this fear or anxiety is the main determinant of a person's willingness to communicate (p. 192). Similarly, Mahdi (2015) asserts that lower

communication apprehension leads students to higher academic success. Apprehension is mostly related with personal or interpersonal traits of learners, such as shyness and low self-esteem. The second type is named as test anxiety, and it is related with the fear of failure since language learning is evaluation oriented. It is a type of anxiety with a high capacity to affect a student's performance, which can usually occur before or during an academic evaluation, usually of productive abilities. Denkci Akkaş et al. (2020) define test anxiety as the collection of behavioral, psychological, and cognitive responses to tests that involve apprehension about failure, negative outcomes, and evaluative circumstances. We often hear students say that they studied hard but forgot everything they knew at the time of the exam. This is the result of their anxiety that causes them to create a mental block and is a concrete phenomenon that shows how they are adversely influenced by their emotions. The last type of performance anxiety in language classroom is fear of negative evaluation. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), this kind of anxiety is characterized by worry about other people's opinions, avoiding situations that could lead to judgments, and the anticipation that others will have a negative opinion of oneself (p. 128). When students feel as if their image is being threatened, either by the teacher or their peers, they are experiencing fear of negative evaluation type of anxiety, leading to low performance in language learning environments (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009).

The issue of how anxiety affects a student's academic success and language use is a more complex phenomenon. As mentioned before, two types of anxiety, debilitative and facilitative, exist in the literature. Studies on speaking anxiety in foreign language classes, which is the subject of this article, have yielded results in both directions. According to Young (1991), anxiety may have had a negative impact on one language skill but not another. Horwitz et al. (1986) claim that because speaking in the target language appears to be the most intimidating aspect of learning a foreign language, developing communicative competence presents particularly significant challenges for the anxious student. Krashen (1982) states in his affective filter hypothesis that anxiety together with self-confidence and motivation are variables which are related to success in second language acquisition and high anxiety acts as filter for good quality language input. On the other hand, some earlier studies, though few in number, suggested that anxiety to some extent may help learner in language tasks and tests (Brown, 1994; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Nicaise, 1995; Scovel, 1978).

Studies related to Speaking Anxiety

A number of studies have been conducted to demonstrate the effects and reasons of anxiety, and factors leading to foreign language anxiety on students' speaking performance. A wide range of students from primary school to tertiary level were selected as the samples of these studies.

In a systematic review conducted by Akkuş (2021), which examined 24 qualitative studies within a Turkish context, six recurring themes emerged as the most commonly studied subjects. These themes revolved around the sources of anxiety, techniques and approaches to alleviate foreign language anxiety, teachers' perceptions of foreign language speaking anxiety, strategies for overcoming speaking anxiety, the impact and outcomes of speaking anxiety, and the definition of an ideal anxiety-free classroom atmosphere. In a great number of empirical studies, the researchers conducted quantitative studies to reveal the relation between gender and FLSA. While the results showed that female students have higher levels of anxiety in most of the cases (Çağatay, 2015; Demirdaş & Bozdoğan, 2013; Karataş et al., 2016; Kındığılı, 2022;

Küçükler, 2020; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Rafek et al., 2013; Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2016), only a few studies revealed that either males have higher levels of speaking anxiety or there is no significant difference between speaking anxiety and gender (Doğan & Tuncer, 2016; Elaldı, 2016; Yılmaz, 2019). In another study, the age factor affecting speaking anxiety level was investigated by collecting data from 4016 participants of different ages from children to adults (Akar, 2021). The results showed that age is an undeniable factor affecting language learning, and English language learners in Turkey experience a moderate level of speaking anxiety. Another result of the same study was that younger learners have lower levels of anxiety than older ones.

Several studies in the literature studied the relation between language proficiency level and speaking anxiety of learners in foreign language classrooms. In Karataş et al.'s (2016) study, 488 English preparatory students at a university were investigated quantitatively. The results revealed that differentiation in the proficiency level (174 pre-intermediate, 259 intermediate, and 55 upper level) does not affect the anxiety of learners of English (p= .20). Balemir (2009) researched the same question on 164 preparatory class students in a university in his MA thesis and found similar results. In contrast, contradictory findings were reported by Debreli and Demirkan (2015) in their study involving 196 university students. Their findings revealed that learners with higher levels of English proficiency exhibited higher levels of anxiety. This discrepancy in results highlights the need for further investigation and a critical analysis of the relationship between English proficiency levels and speaking anxiety among students.

Findings such as speaking in front of the class is more worrying than speaking to a native speaker of English (Çağatay, 2015), or vice versa (Young, 1990), English teachers' strict and negative approaches increase anxiety (Şenel, 2012), social and educational reasons rather than personal reasons trigger anxiety (Kara et al., 2017), fear of making mistakes, forced participation, lack of vocabulary, lack of practice, and lack of grammar had a great effect on FLSA (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020) are among the various results of similar studies.

Rajitha and Alamelu (2020), found in their research that speaking anxiety among tertiary-level students is influenced by various factors that are closely related to the learners themselves. The study identified several factors that contribute to speaking anxiety based on the perspectives of fifty participants. These primary anxiety factors include language proficiency, limited understanding of grammar, challenges with pronunciation, fear of public speaking, lack of confidence, shyness, and the influence of peers. In a more recent study seeking answers about the factors contributing to language speaking anxiety, Suparlan (2021), conducted a case study on eighth-grade students. The study revealed ten significant factors associated with speaking anxiety, including fear of speaking in English, apprehension of teacher's consequences, lack of self-confidence, feeling less competent than peers, experiencing embarrassment, inadequate preparation, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, habitual language use, and anxiety related to language tests.

In conclusion, while the aforementioned studies have provided valuable insights into the factors contributing to speaking anxiety among language students, there are notable gaps and inconsistencies that need to be addressed. Specifically, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive examination of the combined effects of various factors on speaking anxiety, such as grade level, self-perceived English proficiency, receiving special support, and English exam scores. Therefore, further research is warranted to bridge these gaps and provide a more

comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding speaking anxiety in this specific context. Such research will not only enhance our knowledge but also contribute to the development of effective interventions and strategies to support students in managing and reducing their speaking anxiety. Thus, this research was carried out to seek answers to the following research questions:

- What are the differences between female and male students in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA)?
- How does the grade level of high school students affect FLSA?
- What is the impact of students' perceived English level on FLSA?
- How do the previous year's English scores influence students' FLSA?
- What is the impact of previous support for speaking on students' foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA)?

Methodology

In this study, a quantitative cross-sectional survey design was carried out in order to determine the foreign language speaking anxiety levels of students studying at a public high school and to examine the factors affecting it. By measuring a number of variables at one point in time, Field (2016) describes this type of study observing what occurs naturally in the world without directly influencing it (p. 705). Moreover, Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that a quantitative survey design helps researcher to answer descriptive questions, and questions about the relationships between variables.

Context and Participants

The participants of the study were 250 students aged between 14 and 18, at 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades at a state high school. The study was conducted in the fall semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. The survey was administered using Google Forms, and the survey link was distributed to all classrooms' WhatsApp groups using convenience sampling. This ensured that the survey reached all 776 students in the school. It is important to note that participation in the survey was voluntary, and none of the students were compelled or obligated to fill out the survey. Out of the total population of 776 students, 250 students voluntarily completed the survey. The distribution of gender is shown in Table 1. 90 male students (36%) and 160 female students (64%) completed the form

Table 1. *Gender Distribution of the Participants*

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Male	90	36.0	36.0
Female	160	64.0	64.0
Total	250	100.0	100.0

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Table 2. *Gender Distribution of the Participants*

Grade level		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
9th Grade		74	29.6	29.6
10th Grade		76	30.4	30.4
11th Grade		60	24.0	24.0
12th Grade		40	16.0	16.0
	Total	250	100.0	100.0

Table 2 shows the distribution of the participants in terms of grade levels. 29.6% were 9th grade, 30,4% were 10th grade, 24% were 11th grade, and 16% were 12th grade students.

Data Collection

The data needed in this study was collected with the help of the "English Speaking Anxiety Scale" developed by Orakcı (2018) with the purpose of determining students' anxiety levels towards speaking skills in English as a target language. The scale included 16 five-point Likert type items, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. In order to fit our study' aims, five more items (gender, grade level, whether or not the student got any speaking support before, the previous year's English exam score, and self-perceived English level) were added to this scale. In total, the scale became a 21-item scale. The survey was sent to students online using Google Forms. The scale was originally given in Turkish, so students were able to understand the items more easily and give more reliable answers. Overall Cronbach's alpha value of 16 items in the scale was found to be .952 suggesting that the items have high internal consistency.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to compute the frequencies of the data. To test the internal reliability of the scale, Cronbach's Alpha value was computed for the 16 items in the scale. Finally, nonparametric tests (Kruskal-Wallis Test and Mann-Whitney U Test) were applied to determine the significance (p) values for each hypothesis.

The scores of the answers given by the participants to the 1st, 3rd and 9th items, which have a positive expression in the scale, were reversed while the data was being transferred into SPSS. Thus, the positive statements should be interpreted as negative statements. This technique was applied to prevent errors in scoring. The answers given to the items have a score between 1 and 5, and 1 point means low anxiety whereas 5 points means high anxiety. In reverse items, this scoring system works in the opposite direction.

Each participant got an average score ranging from 1 to 5 at the end of the survey. In order to interpret the anxiety levels of the participants, the scores were divided into 5 equal segments with a range of 0.8 points. Of the mean ($\bar{X}$) values for each participant, 4.21 and above were determined as very high anxiety level, between 3.41 and 4.20 as high anxiety level, between 2.61 and 3.40 as medium anxiety level, between 1.81 and 2.60 as low anxiety level, and below 1.80 as very low anxiety level.

Results

Anxiety Level Distribution

Foreign language speaking anxiety levels of speakers were determined according to the means of each participant's answers to 16 items. The distribution that emerged when 5 different groups were formed, from very low anxious to very high anxious, are given in Table 3.

Table 3. *Anxiety Level Distribution of the Participants*

Anxiety Level		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Very Low Anxious		45	18.0	18.0
Low Anxious		53	21.2	21.2
Medium Anxious		61	24.4	24.4
High Anxious		49	19.6	19.6
Very High Anxious		42	16.8	16.8
	Total	250	100.0	100.0

Table 3 presents the distribution of anxiety levels among the participants as deduced from the survey questionnaire. The table displays the frequency and corresponding percentages of participants in each anxiety level category. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of participants fell into the medium anxiety level category (24.4%), followed by low anxiety levels (21.2%) and high anxiety levels (19.6%). Additionally, there were participants who were categorized as very low anxious (18.0%) and very high anxious (16.8%).

In order to test whether the data is normally distributed or not, the mean, median, mode, skewness and kurtosis of the mean scores of each participant were calculated (Hair et al., 2016).

Table 4. *Anxiety Level Distribution of the Participants*

N	Mean	Median	Mode	Skewness	Kurtosis
250	2.9565	2.8750	3.44	.112	-.999

The pattern of responses is regarded as a normal distribution when both skewness and kurtosis are near to zero (between -1 and +1). According to the skewness (.112) and kurtosis (-.999) values of this study, we can say that the distribution of the participants' scores is fairly symmetrical.

Analysis of the First Research Question

The first research question interrogated whether there is a significant difference between female and male students in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety. Using inferential statistics, it is possible to determine whether or not a hypothesis is correct by analyzing the intervals between samples. So, analysis was done through inferential statistics by using independent samples t-test.

Table 5. *FLSA in terms of Gender*

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean Difference	Sig (between groups)
Male	90	2.7319	1.0128	0.35	.015
Female	160	3.0828	1.1237		

The results show that there is a significant difference (p=.015) between male and female participants' foreign language speaking anxiety in this study. Besides it can be said that female high school students have higher levels of FLSA than male high school students, with a difference of 0.35 in the mean.

Analysis of the Second Research Question

The second research question is about investigating whether there is a significant difference among the grade levels of high school students in terms of foreign language speaking anxiety. Descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA test have been utilized to examine the relationship between grade levels of participants and their FLSA.

Table 6. *FLSA and Grade Levels of Students*

Grade level		N	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	Sig. (between groups)
9th grade		74	2.5541	1.0723		
10th grade		76	3.0304	1.0834		
11th grade		60	3.1958	1.0343	5.324	.001
12th grade		40	3.2016	1.0840		
	Total	250	2.9565	1.0961		

Table 6 presents the analysis of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) in relation to different grade levels of students. The analysis reveals that FLSA varies across different grade levels. Participants in the 9th grade (N = 74) had a mean FLSA score of 2.5541, while those in the 10th grade (N = 76) had a slightly higher mean score of 3.0304. Participants in the 11th grade (N = 60) and 12th grade (N = 40) had even higher mean FLSA scores of 3.1958 and 3.2016, respectively. The F-value of 5.324 indicates that there is a significant difference in FLSA between the grade levels. The significance level of .001 further confirms the statistical significance of this difference.

Table 7. *Tukey HSD Post Hoc Test Results*

	(I) Grade of the Student	(J) Grade of the Student	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Tukey HSD	9	10	-.47637	.034
		11	-.64178	.004
		12	-.64751	.012
	10	9	.47637	.034
		11	-.16541	.807
		12	-.17113	.845
	11	9	.64178	.004
		10	.16541	.807
		12	-.00573	1.000
	12	9	.64751	.012
		10	.17113	.845
		11	.00573	1.000

One drawback of using ANOVA testing is that it only compares group averages; it does not classify specific information, such as which specific mean pairs are significant (Nanda et al., 2021). To see the mean differences, multiple comparisons, and significance value between each pair of grade levels, Tukey HSD post hoc test was utilized. The means of all the pairs were

compared in this analysis to determine which ones exhibit a significant difference. As seen in Table 6 and 7, although there is a significant difference (p=.001) between grade levels according to ANOVA test, when we analyze each grade level pair separately with the help of Tukey HSD test, it can be seen that there is no significant difference between all the pairs. The difference is at a significant level when 9th grade is paired with other grades. Other pairs, on the other hand, don't appear to have significant difference.

Analysis of the Third Research Question

To assess the students' self-perceived English language proficiency level compared to their peers, they were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 5, where (1) represents "not sufficient at all" and (5) represents "very sufficient."

Table 8. *FLSA and Self-perceived Level of English*

Self-perceived level	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	Sig (between groups)
Not competent at all	27	4.3287	.6475		
Least competent	55	3.5466	.8524		
Fairly Competent	92	2.8920	.8790	46.871	.000
Competent	48	2.3372	.8307		
Very Competent	28	1.7478	.7838		
Total	250	2.9565	1.0961		

One way ANOVA test was implemented for the analysis of the answers. Table 8 presents the analysis of foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) based on the self-perceived level of English among participants. The analysis reveals distinct variations in FLSA across different self-perceived levels of English. Participants who perceived themselves as "Not competent at all" (N = 27) had the highest mean FLSA score of 4.3287. The mean FLSA scores gradually decreased for participants who perceived themselves as "Least competent" (N = 55), "Fairly Competent" (N = 92), "Competent" (N = 48), and "Very Competent" (N = 28), with mean scores of 3.5466, 2.8920, 2.3372, and 1.7478, respectively. The significance level (Sig) of .000 indicates a statistical significance of this difference.

The Tukey HSD post hoc test was conducted to examine the differences in the perceived level of English proficiency among different groups. Table 9 provides the mean differences between each pair of groups and the corresponding statistical significance. As can be seen in Table 9, the results indicate significant differences between all pairs of groups in terms of perceived level of English proficiency. Participants who perceived themselves as more competent in English had higher mean scores compared to those who perceived themselves as less competent. The differences in mean scores were statistically significant for all comparisons, with p-values less than .05. These findings suggest that there are clear distinctions in the perceived level of English proficiency among the different groups studied.

Table 9. *Tukey HSD Post Hoc Test Results*

	(I) Perceived Level of English	(J) Perceived Level of English	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Tukey HSD	Not Competent at all	Least Competent	.7821	.001
		Fairly Competent	1.4367	.000
		Competent	1.9914	.000
		Very Competent	2.5809	.000
	Least Competent	Not Competent at all	-.7821	.001
		Fairly Competent	.6546	.000
		Competent	1.2093	.000
		Very Competent	1.7988	.000
	Fairly Competent	Not Competent at all	-1.4367	.000
		Least Competent	-.6546	.000
		Competent	.5547	.002
		Very Competent	1.1442	.000
	Competent	Not Competent at all	-1.9914	.000
		Least Competent	-1.2093	.000
		Fairly Competent	-.5547	.002
		Very Competent	.5894	.026
	Very Competent	Not Competent at all	-2.5809	.000
		Least Competent	-1.7988	.000
		Fairly Competent	-1.1442	.000
		Competent	-.5894	.026

It is important to further explore the relationship between self-perceived level of English and students' anxiety levels. To accomplish this, Table 10 presents a cross-tabulation of self-perceived level of English and anxiety level of students. By analyzing the distribution of anxiety levels across different self-perceived English proficiency levels, this table allows us to gain valuable insights into the potential connection between students' perceived level of English and their anxiety levels. It provides a comprehensive overview of the number of students falling into different anxiety categories across various self-perceived English proficiency levels. This information is crucial for understanding the potential influence of self-perceived English proficiency on students' anxiety levels in the context of foreign language learning.

Table 10. *Self-Perceived Level of English * Anxiety Level of Students Crosstabulation*

Self-perceived level	Very Low Anxious	Low Anxious	Medium Anxious	High Anxious	Very High Anxious
Not competent at all	0	0	3	7	17
Least competent	2	5	15	18	15
Fairly Competent	12	23	33	15	9
Competent	15	16	9	7	1
Very Competent	16	9	1	2	0

Table 10 displays the relationship between the self-perceived level of English and anxiety levels among the students. It shows the distribution of students across different self-perceived levels and anxiety levels. The table indicates that students with lower self-perceived English proficiency tend to report higher levels of anxiety. For instance, among students who perceive themselves as "Not competent at all" in English, a larger proportion falls into the "High Anxious" and "Very High Anxious" categories. On the other hand, students with higher self-perceived English proficiency tend to have lower anxiety levels. This suggests a possible

connection between self-perceived English proficiency and anxiety levels among the participants.

Analysis of the Fourth Research Question

In the fourth research question of this study, it was aimed to find out whether there is a relationship between the students' end-of-year English exam scores in the previous academic year and FLSA. Students were asked to choose one of seven possible score segments with 5-point intervals, starting with *69 and below*.

Table 11. *FLSA and Previous Year's Exam Scores*

Exam grades	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	F	Sig (between groups)
Below 69	22	3.8295	1.1100		
Between 70 and 74	21	3.5089	.9111		
Between 75 and 79	25	3.4475	.7270		
Between 80 and 84	34	3.3327	1.0840	11.241	.000
Between 85 and 89	38	2.9457	.8333		
Between 90 and 94	44	2.6548	1.0470		
Between 95 and 100	66	2.3172	1.0181		
Total	250	2.9565	1.0961		

Table 11 presents the relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) and the previous year's exam scores. The table shows the mean FLSA scores for different ranges of exam grades. The data suggest that students with lower exam grades tend to have higher FLSA scores, indicating a higher level of anxiety in speaking. Conversely, students with higher exam grades tend to have lower FLSA scores, suggesting a lower level of anxiety. The findings highlight a potential link between academic performance and foreign language speaking anxiety among the participants.

Analysis of the Fifth Research Question

The fifth and final research question attempted to explore whether there is a significant relationship between students' FLSA, and whether they had previously received support in speaking. Independent t-test was used to analyze the answers given.

Table 12. *FLSA and Previous Speaking Support*

Got support for speaking	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean difference	Sig (between groups)
Yes	73	2.8467	1.0929		
No	177	3.0018	1.0973	-0.155019	.310
Total	250	2.9565			

Table 12 examines the relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) and previous speaking support. The table displays the mean FLSA scores for participants who received speaking support and those who did not. The data indicates that there is a slight difference in FLSA scores between the two groups, with those who received support showing a slightly lower mean FLSA score compared to those who did not. However, this difference is not statistically significant ($p > .05$), suggesting that previous speaking support may not have a significant impact on FLSA levels.

Discussion

This section provides an interpretation of the findings related to foreign language anxiety, comparing them with previous studies. The study examined foreign language anxiety levels based on various factors.

Regarding gender differences, the findings showed that female students tend to have higher levels of anxiety compared to male students, which aligns with findings from several previous studies (Çağatay, 2015; Demirdaş & Bozdoğan, 2013; Karataş et al., 2016; Kındığılı, 2022; Küçükler, 2020; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Rafek et al., 2014; Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2016). Some other studies found that males have higher anxiety or there is no significant difference at all (Doğan & Tuncer, 2016; Elaldı, 2016; Yılmaz, 2019). However, it is important to note that this finding does not imply that all female students are more anxious. The differences in anxiety levels between genders can be attributed to various factors, including societal and cultural influences, individual differences in self-confidence and language perception, and potential biological and physiological factors. Moreover, the cultural context of Turkey may influence the observed gender differences in foreign language anxiety among high school students. Societal expectations, gender roles, and cultural norms surrounding language learning and communication could contribute to varying anxiety levels experienced by male and female students.

The study revealed an interesting finding regarding the relationship between grade levels and anxiety levels among high school students. These intriguing findings challenge conventional assumptions, suggesting that as high school students progress through grade levels, their anxiety levels actually increase rather than decrease. For example, According to Elmenfi and Gaibani (2016), it has been suggested that the degree of anxiety in younger individuals is likely to be higher, particularly due to the fear of negative evaluation. However, these unexpected results contradict the notion that familiarity with the school environment and peers would alleviate anxiety. This pattern is consistent with previous research conducted by Akar (2021), Aydın et al. (2017), Gürsoy (2018), Gürsoy and Akın (2013), and Yılmaz (2019), supporting the notion that as students mature, they may develop protective barriers to shield themselves from potential embarrassment, as proposed by Johnstone (2009, as cited in Gürsoy & Akın, 2013). However, the study by Sertçetin (2006) introduced a twist, revealing that 5th-grade students experienced higher language speaking anxieties compared to their 8th-grade counterparts. In light of the existing research and findings of this study, it is evident that grade level is just one aspect among several other factors that contribute to the complex phenomenon of speaking anxiety among high school students.

The study also tried to explore any possible influence of two distinct factors on students' foreign language anxiety: self-perceived English language proficiency level and previous year's English scores. The results revealed that students with lower perceived proficiency levels and lower English scores tend to experience more speaking anxiety. This finding suggests that as students' English proficiency improves, they may feel more comfortable speaking in class due to a better understanding of grammar rules, vocabulary, and sentence structure. However, these findings differ from the research conducted by Marcos-Llinás and Garau (2009), who found that students with advanced proficiency levels may feel more pressure for success. The contrasting results highlight the complexity of the relationship between language proficiency

and speaking anxiety, and further research is needed to better understand these dynamics. Additionally, studies by Liu (2006) and Dewaele and Ip (2013) with Chinese EFL students and students in Hong Kong, respectively, also found that students with higher proficiency levels experience less foreign language speaking anxiety, supporting the findings of the current study.

Finally, this study examined whether there were differences in foreign language speaking anxiety between students who received special support in speaking and those who did not. *Support* means out-of-school English lessons or courses here. Although significant differences were found in other factors, no significant difference was observed in this regard. While Kındığılı's study (2022) reported lower anxiety levels among students who received support for foreign language lessons, research on students' language learning history is limited.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the understanding of foreign language anxiety among high school students, highlighting gender differences, the influence of grade levels, self-perceived English proficiency, and the role of previous speaking support. The findings of this study have practical implications for educators and language learning practitioners. Firstly, recognizing gender differences in foreign language anxiety can guide teaching approaches to create a supportive environment for female students. Secondly, addressing anxiety at different grade levels can inform interventions and support systems to alleviate anxiety as students' progress. Thirdly, fostering students' self-perceived English proficiency can reduce speaking anxiety by building confidence in language skills. Finally, considering the role of previous speaking support can help in providing appropriate resources for students' speaking development. These practical implications can contribute to the design and implementation of effective language learning programs and strategies.

Further research can be conducted to investigate the relationship between foreign language anxiety and other psychological factors, such as self-esteem or motivation. Exploring these areas can enhance our understanding of foreign language anxiety and its broader implications for language learning and learner well-being.

Limitations

This study has some limitations such as the research uses only quantitative method, the sample group is selected only from a state high school with the convenience sampling method, the students have similar socio-demographic backgrounds, and the distributions are not homogeneous within the groups. The validity of the research can be increased by reaching larger populations by choosing students from different schools, and by using qualitative techniques such as interview, observation, or open-ended survey to triangulate the study.

Conclusions

This study examined various factors influencing foreign language speaking anxiety among high school students. The findings revealed that the participants had a moderate level of anxiety, indicating a state of unease rather than extreme discomfort. Specifically, the study found that (1) female students exhibited higher anxiety levels compared to male students, (2) while there is a significant difference in anxiety levels across grade levels, the post hoc analysis reveals that the difference is primarily observed between 9th graders and the other grade groups, without significant distinctions among the remaining grades, (3) higher self-perceived English proficiency and previous English exam scores were associated with lower anxiety levels, and

(4) the presence or absence of previous speaking support outside of school had no significant impact on anxiety levels. These findings highlight the importance of addressing gender differences, grade level progression, and English proficiency in interventions aimed at reducing foreign language speaking anxiety among high school students. Moreover, future research could delve into other potential factors, such as self-esteem or motivation, to enhance our understanding of foreign language speaking anxiety among high school students and guide the development of more targeted interventions.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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