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**THE IMPACT OF SPEAKING COMPONENT OF AN INSTITUTIONAL TEST ON BILINGUAL STUDENTS' ANXIETY LEVEL**

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of the current study was to investigate whether bilingual university/ college students may have speaking test anxiety. Additionally, it was examined whether there were differences in anxiety levels among bilingual students according to gender. To collect data, 140 bilingual university students were given a GEP-TAS (General English Proficiency test anxiety scale) consisting 3 categories. The 36 items in the questionnaire was subjected to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to determine the subcategories of the scale. Addition to that, the bilingual students were interviewed to get their opinions on how to overcome speaking test anxiety. The results showed that, bilingual university students got extremely anxious during the speaking test. They had experienced sweaty palms, shaky hands and pain in their stomach when they were asked to answer the questions in the speaking test. Also, it was found out that male students were much more relaxed during the speaking test comparing to female students. Students also believe they can tackle down with the speaking anxiety by organizing English speaking activities, making foreign friends, talking to their native teachers and going abroad. Those results were discussed within the context of relevant literature.

**Key Words:** English speaking anxiety, Foreign Language Learning English speaking test anxiety, Education Psychology

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background of the study**

Test takers' hearts are beating faster, they take accelerated breath and they live hard times to focus on the test. When it comes to testing speaking, the situation is getting worse: the accuracy of their speech is affected. So, the language proficiency in speaking test may be impaired by the anxiety. They make mistakes mostly in pronunciation, grammar and constructing sentences. Their anxiety has also an impact on in retelling performance. Concluding from the records show that high-anxious test-takers live problem to give their attention fully to the task and at the end of this, they forget retelling important points (Shi, 2012). Because of the possible problems which may occur during the speaking test, this study aims at voicing the language learners' opinions and feelings specifically about the assessment of speaking skills of the bilingual university students.

### **1.2. Test Anxiety**

Learning a foreign language has always being created tension among the students, especially while taking a test. Every year many brilliant students who are capable of studying, unfortunately give break or leave their schools. There are many factors affecting that and causing students to be apart

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from their study life. One of these factors is test anxiety. Test anxiety is experienced by millions of students each year and it is a very important common issue in education (Zarei ,Fini,& Fini 2010).Test anxiety occurs when academic evaluation of failure is being taken into consideration by the students being unsuccessful (Horwitz & Young, 1991). Test anxiety can be described as the combination of physiological, cognitive, and emotional responses by the stress experienced during the assessment in an exam or test (Spielberger, 1980). It is often experienced by the students when the students are evaluated, or when they take a test or they are forced to give oral presentation in front of other people.

### 1.3. Gender difference in English speaking test anxiety

In human nature, females are accepted more emotional and fragile than males. When females encounter a problem, it is harder for them to struggle as they are considered weaker both psychically and emotionally. When it comes to take test or exam in especially in a foreign language, it is assumed that female students get more anxious than the male students. Findings of a study conducted in Middle East Technical University, Turkey show that female students are prone to anxiety more than male students do while they are speaking English (Öztürk& Gürbüz, 2012). Similarly, Hannon (2012) conducted a study about gender difference in test anxiety. It was found out test anxiety is related with gender. Results of this study have made it obvious that females experience test anxiety and have higher performance-avoidance goals more than males. A study on gender difference in test anxiety, it was found out that anxiety is seen as a female characteristic and as a male characteristic it can be imagined to have success in context of a gender role (Mohammadyari, 2012). According to another study which was conducted in Japan, it was found out that speaking test anxiety has a negative effect on English language proficiency as there is a high correlation between anxiety and foreign language proficiency (Kondo& Yang, 2013). It is possible that they are being anxious before the test and their anxiety level increases before taking the speaking exam and female students are more anxious comparing to male students.

## 2. Aim of the Study

So when the effects of the final general language proficiency test on students is studied, there are many factors to be taken into consideration; gender of the students and the anxiety they experience according to the skill they are going to be examined by. Thus the aims of my study are listed below:

- To understand if Cag University Preparatory School students get anxious during the speaking test in General English Proficiency Test (GEPT)
- To examine whether there are differences in anxiety levels among students according to gender of the students.
- To find out students' opinions about speaking test to overcome/ reduce the anxiety they may have during the speaking test.

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## 2.1. Research Questions

Three research questions guiding this study were asked according to the aims of my study which was conducted. These research questions are listed as following:

- 1) What is the preparatory school students' speaking test anxiety?
- 2) Does gender have an effect on speaking test anxiety levels of the students?
- 3) How do the students think anxiety can be reduced or overcome?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

Second/foreign language anxiety studies are mostly quantitative studies. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the language anxiety, and to reach descriptive information on variables, quantitative studies are appropriate to apply (Price, 1991: 101). This study is a survey research which is quantitative method requiring standardized information of the subjects and involving investigations of the phenomenon. According to Smartt, & Ferreira (2013), survey research needs a long process which involves determining the items collected to be able to answer the research questions, making regulations about the questions such as eliciting the data items, reviewing the survey questions, making the survey valid, conducting the survey, analyzing the survey data and finally finding out the results.

### 3.2. Participants

The participants were preparatory school students at a university. They were chosen randomly by picking the crowded classes comparatively before I handed out the survey. The classes were determined according to the number of the students inside of the classrooms and the survey was distributed to these crowded classes by one by. These preparatory school students were enrolled a one-year intensive English language learning program at beginner, elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate levels. They are in different classes of different levels of English according to the exam results they took at the beginning of the semester. The questionnaire was distributed to the 140 students at the university. According to the demographic questions related to their gender, 51 % of the participants are females (n=71), while 49 % are from males (n= 69).

### 3.3. Data Collection Instruments

The data were collected from two different sources: questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was applied before the students took the exam, and the interview was conducted soon after the students finished the speaking component of the final test.

#### 3.3.1. Survey

Collected data of this study were obtained through a GEP-TAS (General English Proficiency test anxiety scale) survey which was adapted from a study of Wang & Liao (2012). The questionnaire, titled General English Preparation Test scale (GEPT) (See Appendix 1) contained 36 items covering statements related to English language listening, writing, reading and speaking test

anxiety. This survey assesses the preparatory school students' thoughts and worries about final test consisting of two parts; written and spoken part. Before the students filled in the questionnaire, they were explained to use a 5-point rating Likert type scale where 1 was "strongly disagree" and 5 was "strongly agree" to state their choices.

### 3.3.2. Interview

Before the interview, the researcher explained the students the purpose of the interview and informed them that the interview would be recorded. The researcher guaranteed them that their statements would never affect their grades of the exam. The interview was semi-structured. 5 questions were asked about their anxiety during the speaking test, their estimated results, and their thoughts about the speaking test in general. The interview questions were listed as following;

- 1) How did you feel during the English Speaking Test? Were you anxious, or not?
- 2) Did your mind go blank during the English Speaking Test?
- 3) How do you think you can reduce/overcome your anxiety during the English Speaking Test?
- 4) What do you think your result will be?
- 5) Do you think the English speaking test is an advantage or disadvantage for you?

### 3.4. Data collection Procedure

Data collection process took approximately 3 weeks. Before conducting this study, the researcher gave the necessary information both about the study and the questionnaire to the committee members during my proposal defense. The oral informal permission was obtained to conduct the study from preparatory school administrator. Access to the potential subjects was made via the relevant class teachers. After getting the necessary permission, the questionnaire was distributed to the preparatory school teachers one week before the written final exam. Data obtained from the survey was supported by the interviews which were applied to the students right after the speaking test. Their answers for the interview were recorded. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and translated into English.

### Data Analysis

For the survey analysis, computerized data analysis of SPSS which is among the most widely used for statistical analysis in social science was applied as Shur-Fen (2006) also argues that SPSS plays an important role for the researchers to test the research questions and evaluating validity and reliability (Conway & Huffcutt, 2003). Descriptive statistics were used to interpret the data to be able to answer the research questions by describing variables, means and general inclinations in the collected data. Besides, inferential statistics were used to be able to compare and relate three groups in the questionnaire in terms of gender and departmental issues (Creswell, 2012). The data from the survey was supported by semi-structured interviews. For the interview, qualitative approach was used in order to obtain different range of interviewers' opinions as "it begins with individuals and sets out to understand and interpret their experiences of a particular

phenomenon" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The interview data was subjected to content analysis. The themes that were generated by the content analysis were used to support the questionnaire data.

#### 4. FINDINGS

##### 4.1. Bilingual University Students' Speaking Test Anxiety

The second category in the survey contained items related to the spoken component of the GEPT. The speaking exam took 15 minutes and consisted of different tasks such as personal questions, compare and contrast questions and role play activities concerning to their curriculum during the academic year of preparatory school. All of the participants need to take at least 50 out of 100 points in total to be able to pass the exam and continue their departments for the next semester. 20 items in the GEPT-TAS survey are related to the students' speaking anxiety as biggest focus of the study is to scale the speaking test anxiety. The students state that even though they are prepared for the speaking part in GEPT, they still feel anxious about it with a high mean score (M=3.40). It can be also seen in some of the students' answers in the interview:

###### Transcript 1

*I was anxious because it was my first speaking exam I have ever taken. However, I was relaxed, after a while. I was anxious because I was prepared by making practise.*

###### Transcript 2

*I was very anxious because it was the first time that I took this kind of exam. I was prepared for the exam but my mind went blank. I need to be calm and focus on the question to be able to overcome my anxiety.*

According to item 22 (m=3.28) in the survey, students think they will forget what they know because they are anxious. It was shown that 40 students strongly agree and 28 students agree with the idea of "their mind will go blank during the speaking exam" has the highest mean (M=3.57) in 6<sup>th</sup> item of the survey for speaking test anxiety scale, while only 9 students strongly disagree with this statement. Regarding to the question in the interview if the students got anxious during the speaking test, 25 students out of 33 agree that they were anxious and stressed. Afterwards, they explained the reasons why they got anxious. The responses were given below:

###### Transcript 3

*I was anxious because our speaking performance in the exam will be graded. We were more anxious than usual. I was sometimes successful and sometimes not during the academic year. It is possible that I made wrong sentences because of the anxiety.*

###### Transcript 4

*I was very anxious at the beginning but my anxiety started to decrease slowly. This exam was exaggerated a lot by the administrative. It was shown us that we took University Entrance Exam (ÖSS).*

*Transcript 5*

*I was very anxious because the teachers gave so much importance to this exam. My mind went blank because of anxiety. I am not used to this kind of exam.*

**4.2. Gender's effect on speaking test anxiety levels of the students**

While comparing the means of genders (male and female), T-test was used. As it is indicated in Table 1, there is a significant relationship between gender and speaking part in General English Proficiency Test (GEPT). Speaking test anxiety of bilingual university students may be related with the gender. The results show us that males "never" get worried about the speaking part (M=3.25) in item 7 while they can believe that they can do well on the speaking part (M=3.44) with the highest mean score in item 9.

**Table 1**

*Significant relationship between gender and speaking part in General English Proficiency Test (GEPT)*

Question Number	Question	P value	The highest mean score	Gender
7	I never worry about the speaking part in GEPT.	.003	3.25	Male
9	I believe that I can do well on the speaking part in GEPT.	.025	3.44	Male

Responses given for the interview support the assumption that males were much more relaxed comparing to females. According to the interview, female students are more anxious about the speaking component in GEPT comparing to male students in general. While most of the male students were relaxed and comfortable before and during the speaking test, female students were anxious and stressed because of the speaking exam according to interview. Answers of some females about speaking test anxiety are listed as following:

*Transcript 6*

*I was very anxious. I was not able to say the vocabularies I intended to say. Even if I knew Turkish meaning of a vocabulary, I could not say that in English.*

*Transcript 7*

*I was very anxious during the speaking test, because English is the language I am still trying to learn. I do not think the result will be good because my anxiety affected me during the speaking test.*

*Transcript 8*

*I was anxious because our speaking skill will be graded and I was more anxious than normally. During the whole year, sometimes I was successful and sometimes not. So, this unsteadiness made me stressed.*

In general, male students are more relaxed comparing to the female students. They mostly state they were not anxious or stressed.

*Transcript 9*

*I was very relaxed because I knew all the teachers in the exam hall. There were times that I forgot some vocabularies because we do not always speak English.*

### **How do the students think anxiety can be reduced or overcome?**

The students were asked how they think they can reduce or overcome the anxiety for the ones who got anxious during the speaking test. 16 students state they can overcome the anxiety by practising English a lot as well as by travelling abroad, making foreign friends, and making presentations in English in the classroom. Some of the students' answers are listed as following:

*By making a lot of practise in speaking English and making foreign friends, English speaking anxiety can be overcome.*

*The thing to be done is to do practice speaking English more. During the academic year, more speaking classes should be done.*

*To be able to overcome the anxiety, English speaking practise should be done and foreign friends should be made.*

*By doing practise, we can overcome anxiety. This exam is an advantage for me as it will help me in my business life for the future.*

*This anxiety can be overcome by making practise. I believe this exam is an advantage for me because I will encounter these kind of things all my life.*

*The thing done to overcome the anxiety is to do practise more. Daily speaking classes should be given. It is an advantage as we are going to speak English in our daily lives.*

*It is an advantage inspite of everything. It will bring extra point.*

*To decrease the anxiety, English speaking practise lessons can be done before. It is an advantage because not only grammar will help us, but also speaking will be useful in the working life for the future.*

Some of the students think this speaking exam is an advantage for them. The answers were given below:

*It is an advantage because the speaking exam is easier than written exam and provides us to be able to Express ourselves. The teacher can give extra point for that.*

*It is an advantage. Having taken this test will be an advantage for us when we go abroad in the future.*

*I believe this speaking exam is an advantage. Grammar is harder, but speaking exam brings extra points.*

26 students out of 33 think speaking test is a disadvantage for them because their speaking skills will be graded for the final test. However, they think it is an advantage for their future working life as they most probably will have to speak English. The students' comments are listed below:

*Speaking exam is disadvantage for us because the results are graded. However, it is actually an advantage for our working life in the future because language does not only consist of grammar.*

*Speaking exam is an advantage for us. When we start to have job interviews in the future, this speaking exam will be an experience for us.*

*Speaking exam is a disadvantage for me because I could not speak enough and I was very anxious. It is also an advantage for the working life in the future.*

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Suleimenova (2013) argues that one of the biggest problems that English language learners face is English speaking anxiety starting with the difficulty in speaking in front of public. Possible feelings such as fear of failure, and panicking during speaking activity influence the learners' effort and motivation to learn English. Because of the anxiety and stress, learners necessarily show a poor performance in speaking English. Drawing on this argument, the present study was concerned with the preparatory school students' speaking test anxiety in the final test at the end of the academic year. To achieve this aim, this study focused on five research questions which were discussed below:

*Research question 1: What is the preparatory school students' general language proficiency test anxiety?*

According to Orbach, Lindsay, & Gray (2007), students' performance is negatively affected by test anxiety in academic test or examinations. It was investigated whether preparatory school students were anxious during the GEPT through research question 1. It can be seen from the answers of the students that they encountered with a problem in completing the test *in a timely manner* as it constitutes the highest mean score (M=3.35). This may result from the students' stress and anxiety that they experienced during the final exam. As a result of the anxiety they had, they could not possibly focus on the questions on the test and they were distracted by negative thoughts. Craig, Brown, & Baum (2000) state that

anxiety can result in negative thoughts, conditioned responses, undesired thought patterns, poor coping strategies if it becomes intense. Anxiety which is observed by test takers may block thinking, or may cause a negative effect on planning capacity and performance on tests (Nematullah, Zohreh, & Saeed 2009). So, anxiety feelings of the students probably caused them to lose time in the exam. Moreover, preparatory school students' expectations to *have sweaty palms, shaky hands, or other signs of nervousness right before the GEPT* constituted high mean according to the given answers ( $m=3.21$ ). Gierl & Rogers (1996) state that during the exam, students may live a faster heartbeat, perspire or they may face other physical reactions negatively affecting their feelings toward the test. Then it is possible to presume that there were some students who suffered from the general language test.

*Research question 2: What is the preparatory school students' speaking test anxiety?*

The speaking test anxiety which was applied for the first time at the university was investigated through research question 2. Besides this, almost all of the students took a speaking exam for the first time in their lives according to the answers given in the interview. Students were worried that *their mind would go blank* and they would forget everything they knew during the speaking exam. The answers given in the interview after the speaking test to support this assumption: the students forgot the vocabulary and everything they knew, and their mind stopped during the exam. Anxiety was the biggest reason of this according to almost all the students who took the speaking test. This was also apparent in the survey results: they were worried to feel nervous and forget what they knew ( $m=3.28$ ), they felt uneasy about the speaking exam ( $m= 3.53$ ), and they expected their hearts to beat more quickly during the speaking exam ( $m= 3.44$ ). They also state that *they feel anxious about the speaking test even if they were prepared for it*. Bekleyen (2009) argues that anxiety becomes a psychological factor that may negatively affect the students' performances in a very important aspect by constructing a mental block against learning foreign language even if they were strongly motivated and prepared a lot.

As a result of students' speaking anxiety, students' expectations about passing the exam decrease. According to the answers given in the interview, students think their speaking exam results will not be good especially comparing to written exam. This may result from their lack of experience in taking such kind of speaking exam before. Almost every student stated that they had not taken any speaking exam before. Most probably, this created a negative effect on the students.

### **Implications and Suggestion for Further Research**

Based on the findings, English speaking activities should be put more stress in the universities. Students should be encouraged to speak English by supplying them with more speaking activities both inside and the outside of the classroom. So, they can be more used to speaking the language. Further studies can be conducted in order to understand students' expectations in speaking test by interviewing them before and after

to see whether they experience anxiety during the speaking test. This study was limited with the sample being selected only from one institution. In further studies, it can be conducted in other universities where English is taught as second foreign language in order to compare how students feel about speaking and being tested at the same time. More speaking test anxiety studies can be conducted in further studies. Apart from the instruments I used in this study, multiple methods of data collection such as observation during the exam and during the whole academic year in some periods could be used to get more detailed information about the students' reaction to speaking.

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