







## An Examination of English-Speaking Anxiety Among Turkish High School Students: A Mixed-Method Study

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### Abstract:

*Speaking is a productive skill that requires active use of language to communicate effectively. Anxiety during speaking can impede language proficiency. This study aims to examine how foreign-language speaking anxiety among students in Anatolian high schools varies by grade level, gender, and course of study. Data were collected from 324 students using the English-Speaking Anxiety Scale and from 101 students via a questionnaire in a study employing an explanatory mixed-methods design. Thematic analysis and multiple comparison tests were employed to analyse the data. The results indicated that female students and 9th-grade students experienced higher levels of anxiety, although their main subjects did not significantly influence this anxiety. Reasons for anxiety included peer criticism, feelings of inadequacy, and fear of making mistakes. Students who interacted with Turkish speakers as a foreign language exhibited a positive attitude towards making mistakes. It is recommended that the curriculum incorporate collaborative learning, game-based activities, and technology-enhanced approaches to reduce foreign-language speaking anxiety.*

**Keywords:** English Speaking anxiety, high school students, high schools, self-determination theory.



## INTRODUCTION

Communication involves the verbal exchange of information and interaction that reveals behaviours and aims to influence others (Vural et al., 2012). Speech, a complex medium for sharing ideas, helps develop intercultural skills (Usluata, 1991). However, communication often occurs between people who do not share the same language and culture. The importance of language underscores the need for foreign-language skills in today's global communication. As demand for foreign language-competent individuals increases in Türkiye, barriers such as anxiety can hinder learning. Foreign language anxiety, a situation-specific emotional response involving worry and fear, differs from general anxiety and impacts language acquisition (Horwitz, 2010; Kianinezhad, 2024). It resembles fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension (Kianinezhad, 2024). Aydın and Zengin (2008) note that anxiety hampers language learning success. In Türkiye, English starts in second grade. Students in Anatolian high schools are expected to communicate in English, but they often experience speaking anxiety. Several studies have confirmed this (Doğan, 2008; Gedik, 2015; Kozikoğlu & Kanat, 2018; Öner & Gedik, 2007; Sevim & Gedik, 2014). Exploring the causes of foreign-language speaking anxiety can help improve English instruction in Türkiye.

English-speaking anxiety, a common challenge in language learning, arises from psychological and contextual factors. Learners often fear making mistakes, worry about being judged, and lack confidence in their vocabulary and grammar (Lu, 2024; Woodrow, 2006). Cultural and educational practices can worsen this, especially in systems emphasising memorisation and written exams over oral skills, limiting speaking opportunities and increasing anxiety. Social pressures and academic demands can heighten these effects, notably in oral tasks (Yan, 2024). Speaking anxiety impacts learning by discouraging participation, raising stress, and impairing communicative competence (Lu, 2024; Woodrow, 2006; Yan, 2024). Among skills, speaking elicits the most anxiety because it requires immediate production, unlike reading, writing, or listening (Fajri, 2020).

While English-speaking anxiety has been studied mainly in university or professional settings, research in Anatolian high schools, where academic and language education are emphasised, has been limited (Özer & Yetkin, 2022; Yorulmaz & Arabacıoğlu, 2022). This study aims to identify causes of anxiety in these schools and explore factors like grade, gender, and academic field, which remain under-researched.

Given that English instruction in Türkiye begins early and is prominent in Anatolian high schools, understanding psychological barriers is crucial for improving communicative competence. Recognising these causes can help educators and policymakers design more effective curricula and classroom practices, thereby fostering confidence and language skills. Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature on affective factors in second language acquisition, particularly in non-Western contexts. In practice, its insights can help Turkish language educators develop strategies to reduce anxiety and increase student participation.

Individual differences also play a vital role in the acquisition of a foreign language. Research suggests that gender may be a factor, with female students often reporting higher levels of anxiety than their male counterparts. Moreover, students who have undergone preparatory English education typically feel more at ease in speaking contexts. Interestingly, variables such as overall language proficiency and the type of high school attended appear to have little to no significant impact on anxiety levels (Karataş et al., 2006).

Various strategies aim to reduce anxiety in speaking tasks by creating supportive classroom environments and using technology. Activities that lower stress, online platforms with Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR), and online speaking tasks help learners practise in less pressured settings, decreasing anxiety and boosting confidence (Yan, 2024; Bashori et al., 2020).

Language teachers can reduce speaking anxiety through activities such as structured speaking exercises that enhance confidence (Gantina et al., 2023). Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and meditation are recommended to manage anxiety during speaking tasks (Djaguna et al., 2020; Nugroho & Hapsari, 2024). Changing thought patterns, fostering positivity, and using affirmations can help reduce negative thoughts associated with foreign language anxiety (Kondo, 1994; Nurahman et al., 2023). Peer support and feedback also alleviate anxiety by creating a sense of community (Mariani et al., 2023; Nugroho & Hapsari, 2024).

Foreign language speaking anxiety is widely studied globally. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that many Chinese EFL students feared negative evaluations and speaking publicly, linking reluctance to communicate with anxiety influenced by English proficiency and access. Aslan and Thompson (2018) noted that Turkish students' beliefs about language learning affected their anxiety; positive beliefs reduced anxiety and increased confidence, while fear of uncertainty caused performance anxiety. A Turkish study found that speaking and test anxiety hindered student productivity and knowledge demonstration (Aydın et al., 2020); however, reducing these factors improved performance (Dikmen, 2021).

### ***Self-Determination Theory and English Speaking Anxiety***

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a widely used framework for understanding motivation in language learning, particularly in relation to its connection with English-speaking anxiety. SDT emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering motivation, which can influence students' emotional experiences, including anxiety, during second-language learning. A strong sense of competence and relatedness is associated with reduced anxiety in language learning. When students feel capable of speaking a language and can connect with others, they tend to experience less anxiety. However, controlled motivation (externally motivated) is linked to higher speaking anxiety (Alamer & Almulhim, 2021). Students with a strong "Ideal L2 Self" (a vision of themselves as successful English speakers) tend to exhibit lower anxiety and greater intrinsic motivation for acquiring knowledge. This ideal self-image further alleviates anxiety by enhancing self-confidence and the desire to communicate (Ockert, 2015).

Alongside extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation and identified regulation (internalised reasons for learning) are associated with language learning needs and contexts, such as travel, companionship, or learning for knowledge. These scenarios are associated with lower anxiety and greater patience (Liu et al., 2020; McEown & Oga-baldwin, 2019; Noels et al., 2000). Greater learner autonomy and academic engagement foster a desire to communicate, improve self-esteem, and enhance perseverance (L2 grit), all of which are associated with reduced speaking anxiety. However, not all forms of autonomy directly lessen anxiety (Namaziandost et al., 2024).

The classroom environment where students are situated also relates to speaking anxiety. While anxiety arising from the classroom setting negatively affects English achievement and self-efficacy, motivation and self-efficacy positively influence achievement. Self-efficacy partly mediates the relationship between anxiety and achievement, highlighting the importance of psychological support in language classes (Özdemir & Papi, 2021). Zhang and colleagues (2022) suggest that implementing pair work and collaborative speaking activities based on SDT will enhance autonomy and reduce anxiety, particularly in traditionally teacher-centred environments.

Anatolian high schools, established in 1975 to provide academically focused education within the Turkish system (Özgen, 1991), were initially planned to teach all courses in English during their early years. There were 12 such schools at the time; they have since become widespread and are now the most common type of secondary school in Türkiye. What sets these schools apart is their focus on English education. Therefore, graduates of Anatolian high schools are expected to have relatively high proficiency in English.

This study employs Self-Determination Theory (SDT) not only as a framework for understanding students' anxiety about speaking English but also as a guide for structuring the research and interpreting the findings. The SDT's highlighted requirements of competence, autonomy, and relatedness provide a conceptual basis for explaining speaking anxiety, which varies across individuals and contexts, including gender, grade level, and subject areas. In this regard, the quantitative part of the study examined differences in anxiety by gender and class level, in relation to students' perceptions of competence and social connectedness/peer evaluation. Qualitative findings emphasised themes of fear of making mistakes, feelings of inadequacy, and environmental pressure, which were addressed in relation to controlled motivation (external control). Furthermore, participants' contexts of English use and attitudes toward error tolerance were linked to intrinsic/identified motivation, and these factors were used to interpret differences in speaking anxiety. Thus, SLA functions as a lens for testing the questions. In this section, the relationships are integrated with both theoretical and empirical evidence, and the findings are discussed from the perspective of the SDT. The findings will be systematically presented by combining the relationships with relevant evidence, illustrating how they can be interpreted from an SDT perspective.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Turkish high school students' anxiety about speaking a foreign language varies as a function of grade level, gender, and the courses they are taking. To achieve this aim, the following questions were examined:

1. Do students' foreign language speaking anxiety vary significantly across different grade levels?
2. Do students' anxiety about speaking a foreign language differ significantly by gender?
3. Do students' anxiety about speaking a foreign language vary depending on their courses?

## METHOD

This study was designed as an exploratory sequential mixed-method research because it aims to examine various variables related to Anatolian high school students' foreign language speaking anxiety and understand how students justify their reasons for this anxiety (Cameron, 2009; Creswell, 1999). This sequential approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to foreign language speaking anxiety. For this purpose, quantitative measurements were conducted first, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data.

### *Participants*

This study's sample comprises 324 high school students representing the Anatolian High School student profile in Manisa, Türkiye, who were selected through criterion sampling. Gender, grade level, and field of study were taken into consideration when selecting this sample. This diverse sample enables a thorough analysis of foreign language speaking anxiety among Anatolian high school students. The qualitative part of the study involved 101 participants selected from this group. Details about the study sample are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Sample.*

Variable	Value	n	%
Gender	Female	218	67.3
	Male	106	32.7
Class	9	105	32.4
	10	74	22.8
	11	68	21
	12	77	23.8
Weighted Courses	None	105	32.4
	Turkish-Maths.	93	28.7
	Foreign Language	11	3.4
	Science-Maths	74	22.8
	Social Sciences	41	12.7
	Total	324	100

The semi-structured interview form created by the researchers was completed by 101 students selected from the sample. An analysis of the demographic data reveals that 63 participants are female and 38 are male. The participants are distributed as follows: 18 are in the 9th grade, 24 in the 10th grade, 28 in the 11th grade, and 31 in the 12th grade. The students are enrolled in different weighted courses typical of Anatolian high schools. Specifically, 11 students are in Foreign Language, 93 in Turkish-Mathematics, 74 in Science-Mathematics, and 41 in Social Sciences. Additionally, 105 students, all of whom are 9th graders, did not take a weighted course.

### *Data Collection Techniques*

The quantitative data for the study were gathered using the 12-item 'Foreign Speaking Anxiety Scale (ESAS),' developed by Woodrow (2006) and adapted to Turkish culture by Alkan et al. (2019). It is organised as a two-dimensional, five-point Likert scale. Confirmatory factor

analysis showed that the two-factor structure of the scale was suitable for this dataset ( $\chi^2/df = 3.16$ ; SRMR = .04; RMSEA = .08; CFI = .95; TLI = .93). The reliability scores of the scale indicated that the data were consistent (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ; McDonald's  $\omega = .92$ ). The qualitative data were collected through a questionnaire prepared by the researchers and reviewed by two experts specialising in foreign language speaking anxiety. The questionnaire items aim to explore students' experiences and perspectives regarding foreign-language speaking anxiety.

### *Data Analysis*

The ESAS data were analysed for normality and subjected to the Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H tests. The data obtained from the questionnaire were reported with thematic coding. Two coders independently coded qualitative data; subsequently, differences in interpretation were addressed jointly. Information on the themes, categories, and codes used in the qualitative data analysis is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Themes, Categories and Codes of the Qualitative Data

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Students' Perceptions of English	Positive	Enjoyable, easy, cool, confidence booster,
	Negative	Difficult, fear of making mistakes, stressful, fear of being ridiculous, lack of self-confidence, excitement-inducing, boring, weird
	Necessary	Important: personal development, academic success, job opportunities, world language
English usage of participants	Fun	Movies, music, gaming, social media, Phone/PC applications
	Education	Courses/lessons, books, articles, book interviews, exams, magazines
	Travel	In Türkiye, abroad
Students' Anxiety about English	Self-related	Fear of Making Errors, Lack of Knowledge, Difficulty in Constructing Sentences, Excitement, Lack of Self-Confidence, Stress, Fear of Being Made Fun of, Fear of Being Misunderstood
	Context-related	Considering Inadequate Education
	Tolerant	Understanding, Likeable/Sympathetic
	Less Tolerant	Error correction
	Neutral	Neutral

### *Ethics Committee Approval*

This research was conducted with the approval obtained by the decision of the Ethics Committee of Manisa Celal Bayar University, dated 10.09.2024 and numbered 852542.

## FINDINGS

Because the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance for changes in foreign language speaking anxiety among high school students by gender were not met, the Mann-Whitney U test was used on the dataset. The analysis revealed that foreign language speaking anxiety varied significantly among students, with female students displaying higher levels ( $U_{in-class} = 6.12$ ;  $U_{out-class} = 6.31$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Table 3 presents the median scores.

**Table 3.** Gender-based English Speaking Anxiety Scale (ESAS) scores (Mann-Whitney U).

Scale	Gender	n	Median	Sd	df	U	P	Cohen's D.
In-Class Anxiety	Female	218	14	4.98	322	6.12	.00	.72
	Male	106	11	4.27				
Out-of-Class Anxiety	Female	218	18	6.17	322	6.31	.00	.72
	Male	106	13	5.63				

In Anatolian high schools, students receive at least 4 hours of English lessons per week, which can increase to 6 hours when elective courses are included. A Kruskal-Wallis H test was performed to assess differences in anxiety levels across grade levels. The results showed a significant difference in anxiety levels across grades for both in-class and out-of-class factors ( $\chi^2_{In-Class} = 10.1$ ;  $\chi^2_{Out-Class} = 16.6$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Students in the 9th grade had the lowest scores in both types of anxiety. Conversely, the highest average anxiety scores were found in the 10th grade. These findings are further detailed in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results for English Speaking Anxiety by Grade Level

Scale	$\chi^2$	Df	p	$\epsilon^2$
In-Class Anxiety	10.1	3	.01	.03
Non-Class Anxiety	16.6	3	.00	.05

Dwass-Steel-Critchlow-Fligner pairwise comparison tests were conducted to identify which classes accounted for the significant difference in grades. Accordingly, while there was a substantial difference between the ninth and tenth grades in the in-class English speaking anxiety factor, the scale scores of the ninth and all other grades differed significantly in the out-of-class English speaking anxiety scale. These findings highlight the varying levels of anxiety experienced by students across different grade levels, particularly emphasising the unique challenges faced by 9<sup>th</sup> graders.

**Table 5.** Pairwise Comparisons.

In-Class English Speaking Anxiety			Out-of-Class English Speaking Anxiety		
Class	W	P	Class	W	P
10-11	-.64	.96	10-11	-1.43	.74
10-12	-.31	.99	10-12	-1.07	.87
10-9	-3.86	.03	10-9	-5.27	.00
11-12	.24	.99	11-12	.278	.99
11-9	-3.48	.06	11-9	-3.97	.02
12-9	-3.07	.13	12-9	-3.76	.03

In Türkiye, students in Anatolian high schools take the same courses in 9th grade, whereas they begin taking weighted courses in 10th grade. Most courses in the foreign-language weighted classes are taught in English; however, students in other fields may consider them less important. To examine this, a multiple comparison test was conducted with 219 students from the 10th to 12th grades of the sample. According to the findings, students' scale scores do not differ significantly by weighted field ( $\chi^2_{In-Class} = 2.49$ ;  $\chi^2_{Out-Class} = 5.31$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

**Table 6.** Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results for English-Speaking Anxiety by Weighted Subjects.

Scale	$\chi^2$	Df	p	$\epsilon^2$
In-Class Anxiety	2.49	4	.47	.01
Non-Class Anxiety	5.31	4	.15	.02

When asked, "How necessary do you think English is for you?" Seventy-nine students said "necessary," 19 said "somewhat necessary," and three said "not necessary." These responses suggested that the majority of students considered English a vital skill. When inquired, "*Which is easier for you: making a conversation or giving a presentation in English?*", Thirty-nine students indicated a preference for presentations, while 62 favoured engaging in conversations. This implies that students are more inclined to participate in informal English discussions. Regarding the question, "*How comfortably can you communicate at your current level of English?*" Twenty-four students answered "easily," 28 replied "somewhat easily," 33 answered "I cannot communicate comfortably," and 16 stated "I cannot communicate at all." The findings reveal that most participating students experience difficulty communicating comfortably in English.

When asked to evaluate the English language education they had received so far, students generally stated that it was sufficient; however, they noted that classes were crowded, they did not have enough time to develop speaking skills in class, and the topics covered were repetitive. S84 said, "*I think the English language education given at school is constantly repetitive. I still saw the grammar topics we had seen before (in secondary school), with the same system in high school. A language that can be learned quickly under normal conditions (it can be any language) is taught for years, but the student who has taken that course still cannot make a few original sentences in that language. In addition, English cannot be learned simply by opening a book in front of us, unlike mathematics, for example. English is not a course; it is a language, and education should be given as if teaching a language.*" He stated that he had received an education at the same language level since primary school. Despite this, the desired success was not achieved.

Students often find the content of English lessons insufficient to support their speaking skills. First, the lesson's importance is not adequately explained to them (S93). They are unable to speak well, mainly because they struggle to construct sentences during lessons (S99). Although significant emphasis is placed on grammar, insufficient time is allocated to pronunciation activities (S62).

In this study, the themes identified through the descriptive analysis include "*Students' Perceptions of English*", "*Students' Use of English*", "*Students' Anxiety about English*", and "*Students' Approaches to Language Errors*". Table 7 presents the themes and categories related to 'Students' Perceptions of English.'

**Table 7.** Students' Perceptions of English.

Theme	Category	Code	f
Students' Perceptions of English	Positive	Enjoyable	17
		Easy	7
		Cool	4
		Confidence booster	1
	Negative	Difficult	33
		Fear of making Mistakes	7
		Stressful	4
		Fear of being Ridiculous	2
		Lack of self-confidence	2
		Excitement-inducing	2
		Boring	1
		Weird	1
	Necessary	Important	26
		Personal development	11
		Academic success	3
Job opportunities		2	
Universality	A world language	20	

To determine the students' perceptions of English, they were asked to complete the statement "English is ..... because ....." An examination of Table 6 reveals that the most frequently mentioned codes by students include "enjoyable" (17) and "easy" (7) in the "positive emotion" category of speaking English; "difficult" (33), "fear of making mistakes" (7) in the negative emotion category; "important" (26), "personal development" (11) in the "necessity" category, and "a common language in the world" (20) in the "universality" category.

In evaluating the effects and importance of speaking English for individuals, the participants' diverse views are noteworthy. For example, some participants stated that speaking English gives them pleasure and that they could improve through this process. S25 articulated this sentiment: "It is enjoyable because I feel good when I speak, I believe that I can do it, and that I can improve." Similarly, S28 emphasised the enjoyable aspects of learning a language: "Speaking English is very fun and very nice for me because I like speaking English and understanding English or learning other languages." Some participants indicated that they find speaking English easy. While S21 stated, "It is easy because I have a good background," S13 expressed the advantage of a long-term education process: "It is easy because I have been taking English intensively since the 5th grade." S49 highlighted the importance of continuity in language learning: "Speaking English is not very difficult for me because I have been taking English lessons for a long time."

Speaking English presents challenges for some participants. S17 said, "It is hard because I do not know enough English," while S65 stated, "It is hard, my English level is very low," indicating a lack of language proficiency. S66 said his limited vocabulary creates difficulties. Additionally, S24 said he was afraid of making mistakes. At the same time, S27 explained, "Speaking English is hard for me because I have difficulty expressing myself, I can make mistakes in sentence formation and pronunciation," highlighting the challenges faced during communication.

There is consensus among participants on the importance of English. S4 said, “*It is important because I will need it in the future.*” At the same time, S36 stated, “*Speaking English is important for me because it is present in every aspect of our lives,*” emphasising the language's significance in daily life. S73 noted, “*It is important because there are many opportunities abroad,*” highlighting the link between international opportunities and language proficiency. While S19 said, “*It is important to improve my general knowledge,*” S37 said, “*It is important because I want to improve myself,*” underscoring the role of language learning in personal development. S67 said, “*It is a need because it is a universal language,*” noting that English is a global language. At the same time, S63 highlighted the widespread use of the language by stating, “*It is useful because English is spoken all over the world.*” Finally, the statements such as S22 said, “*It is important because it is a language known all over the world,*” and S70 stated, “*It is crucial because it is a world language and very useful for job opportunities,*” showed the role of English in global communication and its impact on career opportunities.

In the questionnaire on students' English learning processes, language learning resources, development of speaking skills, and teacher approaches, students were first asked about their relationship with English as an extracurricular activity. It was observed that the students listened to English music (f=70), watched English movies/TV series (f=61), played English games (f=36), read English publications (f=12), spoke English with friends/others (f=1), and attended language courses (f=1). The thematic analysis results on students' English usage are presented in Table 8.

**Table 8.** English Usage of the Participants

Theme	Category	Code	f	
English Usage of Participants	Fun	Gaming	26	
		Movie	39	
		Social Media	26	
		Music	18	
		Phone/PC Applications	11	
	Education		Courses	12
			Books	5
			Articles	3
			Books Interviews	3
			Exams	2
			Interviews	2
			Magazines	1
	Travel		In Türkiye	6
			Abroad	3

Table 7 categorises the areas where students use English daily into four groups. The most frequently mentioned codes include “movies” (39), “social media” (26), “games” (26), and “music” (18) in the “entertainment” category; “lessons” (12) and “books” (5) in the “education” category; and “touristic places” (6) in the “travel” category. Students primarily encounter English in online environments. The participating students limited their environments to songs, TV series, movies (S23, S53, S100), social media, and phone applications (S83, S33), as well as games (S53, S7, S100).

Table 9 presents the students' responses regarding the reasons for their anxiety when speaking English. The most significant cause of anxiety reported was fear of making mistakes ( $f=31$ ). This is followed by a lack of knowledge ( $f = 26$ ) and difficulty constructing meaningful sentences ( $f = 21$ ). Except for one student who cited inadequate education, all other reported sources of anxiety were attributed to the learners themselves.

**Table 9.** Reasons for Students' English Anxiety

Source of Anxiety	f
Fear of Making Errors	31
Lack of Knowledge	26
Difficulty in Constructing Sentences	21
Excitement	8
Lack of Self-Confidence	8
Stress	6
Fear of Being Made Fun of	6
No Reason Given	4
Fear of Being Misunderstood	3
Considering Inadequate Education	1

When the participants' views on the reasons for anxiety were examined, it was found that one group experienced speaking anxiety due to environmental factors and social pressures. Participant S20 stated, "Yes, I think a lot when I speak because of environmental pressure and being afraid of making the wrong pronunciation." While S86 illustrated this point: "Yes, because I feel like the people around me will laugh at me."

Another identified source of anxiety was language deficiency and difficulty in expressing ideas. From the students in this group, S27 expressed, "I am hesitant to say the word incorrectly, and I also have difficulty in forming sentences." S30 and S63 echoed similar sentiments. S73 and S92 voiced concerns that their knowledge is insufficient for effective communication. For instance, S93 stated, "I cannot speak English and feel bad and anxious because I cannot."

The third category comprises participants who expressed fear of making mistakes in the language-learning process and the accompanying anxiety. For example, S14 and S38 believed that using incorrect words and mispronunciations would make them appear foolish while speaking. "I think because I get anxious because I think there are mistakes in the words I will say, or I do not know how to pronounce them." (S38). S100 expressed concern about insufficient knowledge for effective communication, stating, "I hear it in speaking because I am afraid of making mistakes because the information I have learned is insufficient."

Finally, the question asked how students approach the speech errors of Turkish learners. Accordingly, most participants considered the mistakes of those learning Turkish as a foreign language normal and had a tolerant attitude. As illustrated in Table 10, a small number of students ( $n = 17$ ) reported correcting these errors.

**Table 10.** Students' Approaches to Language Errors

Theme	Category	Code	f
<i>Students' Approaches to Language Errors</i>	Tolerant	Understanding	60
		Likeable	14
	Less Tolerant	Error correction	17
	Neutral	Neutral	9

Table 9 shows that the most frequently mentioned code in participants' responses about how they respond to speech errors by foreigners while speaking Turkish is "understanding," within the "tolerant approach" category. Most participating students exhibited a tolerant attitude toward the mistakes of foreign language speakers. The participants' views on the question can be exemplified by S50, who stated, "This is natural; they cannot speak Turkish as their native language, and we cannot speak English as our native language." Another code identified in the data is "sympathetic."

Nine participants exhibited no preference regarding speech errors. They indicated that errors do not pose a problem as long as they can be understood and corrected. Students who believe that mistakes need to be corrected said that they will "try to do this without offending" (S54), "They will correct them to prevent unintentional use of slang." (S33), and "They will wait until the other person finishes speaking and then correct them." (S26).

## DISCUSSION

The study investigated high school students' anxiety about speaking a foreign language, taking into account gender, grade level, and field of study. The results showed that the field of study does not significantly influence anxiety in foreign language learners. It was observed that students in the "foreign language weighted study" who received intensive English instruction during the last three years of high school did not differ from students in other fields. Doğan (2008) demonstrated that exposure to the language varies across schools, thereby affecting foreign language anxiety. Kındıǧılı (2022) claims that increased exposure to English education reduces FL speaking anxiety.

This study found that female students experience higher levels of foreign language speaking anxiety than male students. Numerous studies support this finding (Akto et al., 2021; Cheng, 2002; Dewaele et al., 2016; Donovan & MacIntyre, 2004; Eminoǧlu Küçüktepe & Öztürk, 2020; Kındıǧılı, 2022; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Park & French, 2013). Conversely, Öner and Gedikoǧlu (2007) concluded that gender does not significantly influence foreign language speaking anxiety. International literature also indicates that anxiety related to speaking a foreign language does not differ by gender (Dewaele et al., 2008; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Woodrow, 2006; Yan, 1998). The analysis by grade level showed that ninth-grade students were more anxious than students in other grades. However, Kındıǧılı (2022) found that grade level did not affect speaking anxiety.

Students put forward individual reasons for speaking anxiety (Saltan, 2003). Concerns about making mistakes, being judged by peers or teachers, and receiving negative feedback are seen as common anxiety triggers (Lu, 2024; Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017; Samad et al., 2021). Students' foreign-language speaking anxiety is attributed to fear of making mistakes, lack of knowledge, difficulty forming sentences, excitement, and low self-confidence (Baş, 2014). Students often experience anxiety when speaking in front of their classmates (Aydın & Kurt, 2022). Anxiety stemming from social pressure and negative judgments is prominent. Environmental pressure can reduce individuals' desire to express themselves during language learning, thereby increasing social anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Students' feelings of inadequacy in English can also lead to speaking anxiety. A lack of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, along with a fear of making pronunciation mistakes, are key sources of anxiety. These linguistic shortcomings can instil a fear of speaking and lead to decreased participation (Alnahidh & Altalhab, 2020; Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017). Anxiety about non-native accents and the desire to sound like a native speaker can create stress, mainly due to fear of negative peer evaluation and communication issues (Coppinger & Sheridan, 2022). Language inadequacy can heighten anxiety levels by limiting individuals' ability to express themselves (Schmidt, 1990). In the study by Orakçı et al. (2019), students with firm self-efficacy beliefs reported lower speaking anxiety. Students in a foreign language learning environment often feel confused about what to do when they cannot understand what they hear. Those who do not know how to respond are likely to experience increased anxiety as a result (Baş, 2014).

The largely positive reactions of students to the speech errors of individuals learning Turkish as a foreign language suggest that such errors are perceived as acceptable. Students mention that their teachers' use of monotonous teaching methods and techniques creates anxiety in them (Baş, 2014). The formality of the school environment, the teacher's attitude, peer interactions, and classroom dynamics notably influence anxiety levels. Besides factors such as the teacher's age, sincerity, and self-presentation, the gender and familiarity of peers can also raise anxiety (Effiong, 2016; Samad et al., 2021). Anxiety related to English-speaking situations is linked to exams in many cultures (Woodrow, 2006; Yan, 2024). It can stem from the pressure of oral exams, being in challenging situations, and the need for quick responses. These performance pressures are further intensified by cognitive demands such as processing and planning time (Hanifa, 2018; Samad et al., 2021). However, this study did not identify test anxiety as a cause of students' anxiety. The fact that students' reactions to the speech errors of individuals learning Turkish as a foreign language are mostly positive suggests that mistakes are generally tolerated. The fact that students who find others' mistakes acceptable are anxious about making mistakes themselves suggests that learners should be taught that mistakes are natural in the language learning process.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Foreign language speaking anxiety has long been a subject of study in the field of language teaching. However, language learners still in education experience this anxiety in a similar way. Although the aim is to teach English to develop communicative competence from the second grade in Türkiye, this anxiety persists in high schools, where academic achievement is emphasised and English lessons constitute a significant part of the weekly curriculum. Notably, female students tend to be shyer due to cultural factors or puberty, and 9th-grade students show higher speech anxiety, which are important findings of this study.

Moreover, the observation that students in intensive programs do not experience different anxiety levels compared to those in English-focused departments suggests that language mastery does not significantly affect anxiety levels. The primary reasons for students' anxiety are personal. The embarrassment they feel towards their classmates and peers, along with feelings of inadequacy, are the primary sources of anxiety. Additionally, students have expressed that they find the English learning system inadequate.

This research is a cross-sectional study, and the reasons for foreign-language speaking anxiety were analysed using student statements. These two issues may be considered limitations of the

study. According to the research results, it is suggested that communication skills should be incorporated into the curriculum, emphasising to students that making mistakes is normal, alongside language teaching. In addition to students' academic mastery of language skills, they must also receive psychological support within the curriculum for speaking, which is a productive language skill.

Feedback from teachers and parents regarding students' language anxiety can also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the external factors influencing learners. Ultimately, experimental studies that assess the effectiveness of anxiety-reducing classroom techniques, such as peer collaboration, game-based learning, or technology-integrated speaking tasks, could provide practical guidance for educators and policymakers.

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