

The challenges in EFL course exams faced by the students at international relations: A Qualitative Study

Uluslararası İlişkiler Öğrencilerinin EFL Ders Sınavlarında Karşılaştıkları Zorluklar: Nitel Bir Çalışma

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Abstract

In Turkish higher education, there is an increasing trend of adopting English-medium instruction (EMI) thereby making effective assessment of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) more important. This study used a qualitative methodology to identify the problems faced by Turkish students majoring in International Relations regarding the content of summative examinations (i.e., midterm and final) within the context of EMI programs in Türkiye, and to investigate students' views about the way examinations are conducted within their departments. Data for this study were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with thirty students enrolled in a state university in Türkiye. Each audio-recorded interview lasted between 15 - 20 minutes. Reflexive thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data collected. The analysis resulted in five key themes: a) Exam anxiety and emotional pressure; b) Difficulties associated with oral assessments; c) Time constraints; d) Perceived disconnect between classroom instruction and the actual content of the examination; e) Lack of technology-enhanced assessment practices. Students mentioned having a strong interest in using technology-supported and AI-enhanced assessment tools, which could offer immediate feedback. Overall, the results from the current study demonstrate a need for more aligned and student-centered assessment practices in EMI programs. The findings of this study have implications for both pedagogical and policy-related practice related to EFL assessment in higher education contexts.

Keywords: EFL assessment, exam anxiety, English-medium instruction

Öz

Türk Yükseköğretimde İngilizce eğitim (EMI) uygulamalarının giderek yaygınlaşması, yabancı dil olarak İngilizcenin (EFL) etkili biçimde değerlendirilmesini daha önemli hâle getirmektedir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki EMI programları bağlamında uluslararası ilişkiler öğrencilerinin ders sınavlarına (vize ve final) ilişkin karşılaştıkları sorunları belirlemek ve öğrencilerin bölümlerinde sınavların uygulanma biçimine yönelik görüşlerini incelemek amacıyla nitel bir yöntem kullanmıştır. Araştırmanın verileri, Türkiye'de bir devlet üniversitesinde öğrenim gören 30 öğrenci ile gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Ses kaydı alınan her bir görüşme 15-20 dakika sürmüştür. Toplanan verilerin analizinde refleksif tematik analiz yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Analiz sonucunda beş temel tema ortaya çıkmıştır: a) Sınav kaygısı ve duygusal baskı; b) Sözlü değerlendirmelere ilişkin güçlükler; c) Zaman kısıtlılığı; d) Sınıf içi öğretim ile sınavın gerçek içeriği arasındaki algılanan uyumsuzluk; ve e) Teknoloji destekli ölçme-değerlendirme uygulamalarının eksikliği. Öğrenciler, anında geri bildirim sağlayabilecek teknoloji destekli ve yapay zekâ temelli değerlendirme araçlarının kullanımına güçlü bir ilgi duyduklarını belirtmişlerdir. Genel olarak, bu çalışmanın sonuçları EMI programlarında daha uyumlu ve öğrenci merkezli ölçme-değerlendirme uygulamalarına ihtiyaç olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, yükseköğretim bağlamında EFL ölçme-değerlendirme uygulamalarına yönelik hem pedagojik hem de politika düzeyinde önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yabancı dil olarak İngilizcenin değerlendirmesi, sınav kaygısı, eğitim dili İngilizce olan öğretim

Introduction

The academic field of International Relations has become increasingly reliant upon students achieving a high level of proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in order for them to succeed academically and develop professionally (Hariyanti et al., 2024). In Türkiye, many students face considerable difficulty when taking English course examinations (Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021); however, this difficulty is not due simply to a lack of English language skills. Other possible reasons include examination-related anxiety, the unfamiliarity with the format of the examination, and/or a perception that the content of the instructional curriculum does not match the way in which they will be evaluated (Wang et al., 2025). While English-language instruction and assessment methods are becoming more prevalent in universities, there is limited research available examining these issues in detail regarding the challenges faced by International Relations students enrolled in EFL coursework during their tertiary education.

This qualitative study has been specifically designed to investigate what challenges are experienced by International Relations/EFL students during course exam(s) and what underlying causes may have contributed to such challenges. Specifically why International Relations program is aimed at the study lies on the serious concerns of the students during the researcher's English Medium Instruction (EMI) course and existing literature focusing on the importance of English for the IR students (Markova & Yaneva, 2020; Saputro & Hima, 2018). In addition, recommendations are offered regarding how best to improve EFL assessment practices in EMI courses so that students might have an increased chance for success and engagement.

In this study, EFL course examinations refer to English language assessment activities designed to evaluate students' English proficiency. EMI (English-Medium Instruction), on the other hand, refers to academic programs in which disciplinary content is delivered through English. Although the participants were enrolled in an EMI context, the

focus of the present study is specifically on students' experiences of EFL course examinations rather than assessments conducted in content-area EMI courses.

Theoretical background and review of literature

Conceptual Framework: Constructive Alignment

Constructive Alignment Theory (Biggs, 1996) serves as the conceptual basis for this study. Constructive Alignment Model provides guidance on how the three major components of a student's academic experience - intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment - should fit together so that students can achieve the best possible learning outcomes. Students will attain more meaningful learning outcomes if the assessments they will take reflect what has been taught in class along with the expected competencies from those lessons. The misalignment of assessment to instructional practices can induce anxiety, demotivate students, make students feel unfairly treated, and negatively impact their academic performance.

The development of constructively aligned assessment practices can provide a framework for understanding how to best develop assessments for students learning through EMI modalities. This conceptual framework will enable educators to understand how to design assessments that will promote meaningful learning outcomes while providing the appropriate opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education in Türkiye

In Türkiye, EMI has developed significantly over the last several years due to the number of public and private universities now providing courses in disciplines such as engineering, medicine, business, and international relations, but it is also possible to provide EMI programs for many other discipline areas (Kirkgöz & Karakaya, 2022). More

than half of all Turkish Universities are now requiring students to complete a preparatory English Course as part of their university studies (Coskun, 2013; Kurt & Bayyurt, 2024).

While initiatives have been undertaken to assist students with academic English proficiency, research has shown that numerous students still experience significant difficulties with academic reading, writing and assessment in English (Markova & Yaneva, 2020). A relatively small number of studies conducted in Türkiye have revealed a disconnect between the type of English Language instruction and the demands placed on students studying through an EMI Program (Yıldız et al., 2017). Many EMI students describe difficulties with academic English vocabulary and specialised terminology used in a variety of disciplines, and with understanding exam questions. Language anxiety and a lack of self-confidence, as well as fear of failure, are affective factors associated with negative academic performance in EMI programs (Quijano & Asio, 2022). The challenges associated with academic reading and essay writing at the university level play a greater role as academic success in this discipline relies heavily on the ability to read complex texts, write analytically and engage in discussion in English.

The Importance of Assessment and Examination in Language Acquisition

Assessment serves a vital role in influencing how individuals learn a foreign language and the success of their learning process. Assessments provide information about how students are achieving in their studies and also impact the student's approach to the learning process, motivation and expectation of being successful in their efforts to learn a new language (Bailey & Carroll, 2015; Dmitrenko et al., 2021). The pressure to perform on high-stakes assessments in EFL settings often dictates how the classroom is run and how students behave in the classroom, exemplified by a phenomenon referred to as the "washback effect" (Alderson & Wall, 1993; McKinley & Thompson, 2018).

The positive washback occurs when a language assessment promotes the acquisition of meaningful knowledge and skills by a learner, while negative washback occurs when tests are used for memorisation and test-oriented learning at the expense of developing communicative competence. Research indicates that the manner in which exams are constructed, assessed and their grading systems are implemented have serious consequences on the language acquisition experience for students (Green, 2014; Phakiti & Leung, 2024). For example, assessments that primarily consist of grammar and multiple-choice questions do not adequately assess students' ability to communicate, thus hindering their development of productive language skills (i.e., speaking, writing, etc.) (Wang, 2025).

On the other hand, using performance-based assessments and implementing formative evaluation practices promote language development and alleviate anxiety associated with taking the exam (Hatipoğlu, 2021). Meanwhile, some scholars stressed such challenges of assessing oral performance as the need for trained evaluators, a transparent and consistent evaluation scheme (Doosti & Ahmadi Safa, 2021) in addition to its drawback as time consuming (Putri et al., 2019). Contrary to its limitations, Amiri (2020) firmly suggests to pay considerable amount of attention to adapt to the main four skills, especially oral skills.

Exams are commonly used in EMI programmes as not only a measure of language proficiency but as a gatekeeper to academic progression. As a result, students face a high level of stress and anxiety regarding their performance on exams (Amiri & Ghonsooly, 2015). This anxiety contributes to poor reading comprehension skills, low levels of concentration, and overall low performance on exams, particularly among students from foreign language backgrounds who may feel insecure regarding their language ability.

Exam Challenges Faced by EFL Students and Their Experiences

The amount of research exploring the difficulties students encounter on EFL exams is steadily increasing (Akmal et al., 2020; Huang, 2005; Jiménez, 2015). The types of difficulties generally reported by students are interpreting complex passages of text, formulating a coherent written response, interpreting audio material, and managing their time properly during the course of the exam. More specifically, students report issues regarding unclear instructions, unfamiliar types of questions, and a perceived lack of correlation between the content of classwork and the exam content (Elmotri, 2025; Jensen et al., 2014).

In Türkiye, a few studies found that students in EMI programmes stated that they encountered difficulties with exam language, the use of academic vocabulary, and the requirements of the tasks (Kamaşak et al., 2021). These difficulties are often compounded by exam-related anxiety and a lack of opportunity to receive formative feedback. In addition, the students' beliefs regarding the fairness and transparency of exams play an important role in students' motivation and engagement in learning language (Reierstam, 2024; Shaw & Imam, 2013).

Qualitative Exploration Is Needed

While a number of recent studies regarding EFL course examinations in Türkiye have been done (e.g. Altay, 2022; Birgün, 2023; Kurt & Bayyurt, 2023; Özer, 2020), most have done so quantitatively (i.e., test scores, language proficiency level) and have not explored in-depth the lived experiences and perceptions of students regarding their assessments. Through qualitative exploration, researchers gain insight into how students view and interpret the challenges that arise from exam administration, how they deal with such difficulties, and how they evaluate the assessment process (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Gaining a greater understanding of how students feel regarding their ex-

ams is likely to lead to improvements in the development of language education and the design of assessments of all students.

The current research study has a number of significant contributions to the current literature concerning English as a foreign language (EFL) assessment in the context of English Medium Instruction (EMI). The first contribution of this research study is that the majority of previous studies conducted in Türkiye have used predominantly quantitative methods to assess EFL students' proficiency levels and their examination results; therefore this study conducted an in-depth qualitative study of students' lived experiences with regard to EFL assessment. The qualitative nature of this research study provided an opportunity for the research team to examine the extensive range of mutually dependent linguistic, emotional, and structural factors that influenced students' performance in EFL examinations and to address an important gap in the existing literature on EMI.

The second contribution of the current research study is that it adds to the existing body of research conducted on EMI programs by examining a specific group of EMI students: namely, those students studying international relations. Since English language proficiency is an essential competency for both academic and professional success for students studying international relations, the current research was able to provide an in-depth understanding of the challenges students face with assessments. This understanding was achieved by conducting a study on just one discipline (i.e. international relations), whereas the majority of current EMI studies examine EMI applications across a number of different disciplines (i.e., accounting, education, etc.).

The current research study expands existing literature on language assessment by identifying both traditional assessment challenges (i.e. test anxiety, difficulty producing spoken English, lack of time) as well as new assessment challenges, specifically related to the lack of technology-enhanced and AI-enabled means of assessment. The novel nature of this finding exemplifies the increas-

ing importance of technology-based learning environments to students and their increasingly high expectations to use innovative and interactive forms of assessment.

The current research emphasizes the need for alignment between instructional and assessment practices in order to improve the assessment and EMI literature. By emphasizing the need for alignment between instructional and assessment practices through demonstrating how perceived misalignment results in students feeling unprepared and lacking confidence, the current research provides empirical support of the importance of the design of assessments in shaping students' learning experiences and outcomes. Therefore, the current research provides a comprehensive and student-centered perspective of the challenges faced by students with EFL assessments within EMI programs, along with recommendations for both theoretical and practical changes to the way assessments can be improved in higher education.

The study of challenges associated with examinations is also beneficial to students studying International Relations, as their academic success relies heavily upon a high level of proficiency in the English language. By better understanding the students' perspectives on their exam-related challenges, educators and developers of curriculum can better align the goals of language instructional programmes with the needs of EMI departments, and subsequently assist students in their academic and linguistic growth. This study intends to explore this subject through the following questions:

1. How do EFL course exams influence students' language learning processes?
2. How do EFL course exams affect students' exam anxiety?
3. To what extent do students perceive EFL course exams as preparing them for EMI in their departmental studies?

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the complexities of the challenges experienced by international relations students in English

as a foreign language course assessment. An interpretive qualitative design employing thematic analysis was utilised to examine how these students experience, perceive and understand their examination challenges.

The reason for the selection of a qualitative approach is that it provides for an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences, perceptions and feelings towards EFL examination challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hollstein, 2011; Levy, 2015). By using qualitative approaches, the researcher was able to obtain in-depth, descriptive accounts of the various types of linguistic, cognitive and emotional challenges experienced by students, as well as the impact of these challenges on their second-language acquisition and level of preparation for English-medium instruction.

Participants and Context of the Study

This research took place at a public university that provides EMI courses in the International Relations department in Türkiye. The sample consisted of 30 4th-year students from the EMI class, chosen using purposive sampling strategy based on criteria. The use of this sampling technique in this study ensured that all participants had had relevant and direct experience with the English as a foreign (EFL) course examinations while attending an English medium instruction (EMI) program. The inclusion criteria required each participant to be enrolled in an EMI course in Intl. Relations, have already completed one full semester of courses in the EMI program, have taken at least two EFL course exams within the EMI program, and agreed to participate in this research study.

Criterion-based purposive sampling is appropriate for this educational research study because it allows researchers to select information-rich cases that can provide in-depth insights into a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The participant criteria included: a) currently enrolled as a student in the EMI course; b) aims to continue studies in the International Relations department; c) completed a minimum of one term in the EMI

program; d) have taken two English language exam quizzes; and e) willing to participate freely.

Though none of the participants have received preparatory language education, they are expected to attend 3 hours each week (in total 48 hours (7 ECTS) each term). In this course, not only use of grammar but also skill-based sections, including writing and speaking are sought; thus, a variety of question types such as multiple-choice, open-ended, and true-false questions are employed. The exams take at least one hour depending on the exam format.

Qualitative studies demonstrate that obtaining a sample of thirty participants generates thematic saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2006), namely an accumulation of themes from diverse students' perspectives about their exam experience.

Data Collection tool and procedure

The researcher used a semi-structured interview form (Appendix 1) created from a review of the literature and the opinions of three experts, working in ELT department, for collecting data. Expert feedback from EFL specialists regarding teaching methodology, assessment and evaluation, and use of English as a medium of instruction was obtained and used to establish content validity of the interview form. The researcher conducted pilot interviews with 3-5 students before the main data collection so that any questions could be clarified and/or revised if necessary.

The pilot interview helped ensure that all questions were relevant to participants. During the initial stages of data collection for this study, a small number of participants (3) meeting eligibility requirements were chosen to participate in a pilot study. The primary aim of this pilot study was to test both the comprehension and appropriateness of the proposed research questions. In addition to testing the content of the interview questions, the pilot study was also used to evaluate the structure of how the interviews would be conducted. Participant feedback from the pilot study indicated that some of the wording of several interview questions required revision in order to clarify any potential

confusion or ambiguity. Some of the questions were changed in order to simplify them for participants. Additionally, there was a need to reorganise the sequencing of certain interview questions to provide a more logical order and flow. Information gleaned from the pilot study enabled the researcher to calculate the expected time required for each individual interview and reconfirmed the overall suitability of the interview protocol to address the research questions. The data collected from the pilot study were not included in the main data analysis.

Each interview, all of which were conducted in Turkish, lasted about 15-20 minutes and took place either in person or via the internet, depending on the availability of the interview participant. All interviews were recorded with the interviewee's permission, and then accurately transcribed verbatim. In order to ensure data triangulation, in-depth interviews were conducted with five students in which the participants were asked to explain further or exemplify the challenges.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest the use of reflexive thematic analysis in analysing the collected data through a systematic approach towards identifying and interpreting patterns/themes of qualitative data. The analysis involved six distinct phases: 1) Familiarising oneself with data through repeated readings; 2) Generation of initial codes; 3) Theme searching; 4) Theme reviewing; 5) Theme defining/naming; and 6) Producing the final report. The data was analysed initially manually (the data from 2 students) by the second researcher to better comprehend the relations amongst the codes, then with the aid of qualitative software package (e.g. NVivo) by the first researcher. In the end, both researchers discussed on the codes and themes and came into an agreement.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The following strategies were used to ensure that this study was a credible and dependable source

for accurate and truthful information. To ensure the credibility of this study, an expert review of the interview questions was conducted. A pilot test of the interview form was done with selected participants prior to conducting the actual interviews. Member checking with selected participants (10% of the data) allowed the researchers an opportunity to validate the findings from the interviews. Consistent with the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the aim was not to achieve coder consensus or statistical agreement, but rather to encourage critical reflection and discussion among the researchers throughout the analytic process. Peer debriefing and reflexive discussions were conducted to enhance the credibility of the analysis. Peer debriefing with colleagues took place during the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews. In addition, to promote the trustworthiness of the study, each of the findings was described in detail in a comprehensive fashion.

Institutional Review Board approval (Appendix 2) was secured before data collection started. The data collected was only included by those individuals who have agreed to participate in accordance with an informed consent process. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were protected by assigning a pseudonym to each student instead of names (e.g. S1, S2). All information collected were used for academic research purposes only, with data maintained in a safe and secure location.

Findings

The semi-structured interviews with a sample of 30 4th-year students in the International Relations Program provided a comprehensive analysis of recurring themes in regards to the challenges faced during EFL course examinations. The analysis was conducted using Reflexive Thematic Analysis and identified five major themes relating to Course Assessment: 1) Exam Anxiety and Emotional Pressure, 2) Difficulty with Speaking Assessments, 3) Time Constraints, 4) Misalignment between Teaching and Assessment Practices, 5) Limited Use of Technology and Artificial Intelligence in Student Assessment Practices (as shown in Figure 1).

Each of these themes highlights both the Linguistic and Affective Components to the Student Experience in Assessment, and thus the influence of current EFL Assessment Forms on English Language Learning.

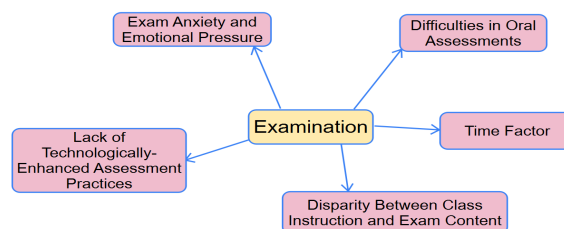


Figure 1. Map of the Categories

Exam Anxiety and Emotional Pressure

One of the most significant findings of this study was the significant degree of Exam Anxiety reported by participants during English assessments. Many participants reported experiencing a heightened level of stress and anxiety when taking English exams compared to taking non-English assessments. Participants expressed that unknown regarding the content of the exam created high levels of anxiety, leading to difficulties concentrating and remembering information and responding to questions in the exam.

A majority of participants noted feeling greater anxiety when taking English exams, rather than when taking exams in their native language. They commonly associated the anxiety with (1) fear of failing the assessment especially in speaking, (2) limited vocabulary, and (3) concerns over making grammatical errors in their responses. Additionally, students emphasized that the high-stakes nature of the exam format created additional stress and diminished their confidence levels in their English writing abilities. "I feel like I forget what I pass in the exam when I panic, even when I study so hard for it," stated one participant (S2). Another (S7) said, "There is much more to my exam anxiety than just passing the course. I believe my success in English determines what will happen to me in my future department." A third student (S14) stressed how embarrassed she felt during speaking exams. Hence, many students' responses indicated that anxiety

related to exams is a major deterrent from being able to demonstrate their level of proficiency in English and that this type of anxiety has a negative impact on both student performance and motivation to succeed in their studies.

Difficulties in Oral Assessments

Difficulties encountered in oral assessments represent another significant theme regarding the difficulties encountered by students. Most students indicated that EFL's judging oral proficiency tests were one of the toughest parts of taking the EFL exams. Of concern was the students' inability to express their ideas in English without any preparation time and, in particular, in front of an instructor. Students expressed feeling that there were not enough opportunities for speaking practice during classes. Students also referenced being anxious about the possibility of making a pronunciation, or grammatical, error, and the immediate evaluation of that error by the instructor. One student (S21) expressed, "Oral assessments are the most difficult because I struggle to formulate ideas effectively in English in a short amount of time." Another student (S9) stated, "There is little opportunity to practice speaking in our classes; however, we must speak fluently during the assessment." It appears that these results reflect a gap between the classroom activities that support speaking development in the classroom and the level of expectation placed on students for speaking capabilities during oral assessments, which may create additional stress and confusion for students as they prepare.

Time Factor

Students also identified another significant issue in taking their exams related to the time available for completing the reading, writing, and listening sections. Students reported that the time provided to them to read, write, and listen was insufficient, given that students must process questions presented to them in a foreign language. Students reported needing more time to go through instructions, to think of unknown words in their heads, and

to complete their answers. One student (S30) talked about how her understanding of the subject was clear, yet the amount of time she had to complete the test made it difficult to finish answering the questions. Another student (S19) noted that his reading of the texts for the exam was really long and complicated. He found himself spending so much time reading through and comprehending that he could not complete the test.

From these two responses, we have got a clear picture of how the time pressure associated with taking an exam can end up impacting performance negatively for students who otherwise have sufficient knowledge about the content of the course material.

Disparity Between Class Instruction and Exam Content

A large part of our participants stated that they sensed a disconnect between what is taught in their program and tests. Specifically, many of the students felt that many exams were not reflective of what was practised in the classroom. That is, while the focus may have been on using different types of grammar drills or correctly completing basic exercises, the actual content of an exam consisted of using the more extensive levels of reading comprehension, analytical skills, and writing based on a specific context. Because of this perceived disparity, many students reported feeling unprepared for their exams, and consequently, they turned to frustration with their instructors' attempts to meet their educational requirements.

One student (S13) noted that she does not understand the correlation between what she completed during lessons and what was needed to pass. Another student (S1) commented about finding that the exam covered topics that were not introduced or discussed in lectures. Therefore, if classroom practice is focused on teaching grammar, helping students develop and enhance their language, and then assessing that learning through a combination of related assessment methodolo-

gies, there can be more direct relationships established between the methods by which a student is taught and subsequently assessed.

supported (artificial intelligence) speaking evaluation methodologies, writing feedback technology, and online assessment methods, as these types of methods can help to facilitate both student and in-

Table 1. Themes with specific codes

| Exam Anxiety and Emotional Pressure | Difficulties in Oral Assessments | Time Factor | Disparity Between Class Instruction and Exam Content | Lack of Technologically-Enhanced Assessment Practices |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|--|---|
| Fear of failure | Linguistic Challenges | Insufficient time | Different questions from classroom activities | No AI-based speaking evaluation |
| Panic | Limited vocabulary | Rushing | Unexpected question formats | Lack of automated writing feedback |
| Stress | Difficulty forming sentences | Mental translation | Overemphasis on grammar* | Limited digital assessment tools |
| Difficulty concentrating | Pronunciation concerns | Slow reading comprehension | Limited communicative practice* | Preference for interactive exam formats |
| Forgetting | Grammar accuracy | recalling vocabulary | Lack of integrated skill training | Interest in digital language platforms |
| Low self-confidence | Difficulty expressing ideas | Incomplete responses | Unclear scoring methods | Limited self-directed learning |
| Fear of making grammatical mistakes | Limited speaking activities | Reduced answer quality | Unfair exam expectations | |
| Anxiety about limited vocabulary | Exam-oriented education | Skipping questions | Confusion about exam criteria | |
| Nervousness | Lack of real-life communication | | | |
| | Inadequate feedback | | | |

*Placed twice

Lack of Technologically-Enhanced Assessment Practices

One of the most important discoveries made was the recognition that students are becoming increasingly aware of the advantages associated with using advanced technology in the area of language instruction/assessment. Students expressed an interest to learn about how those advanced technologies can be applied and used to assist teachers and students' assessments during the learning process. The advantage of using technology in assessment is that students believe that with the use of technological support in their assessments, they will receive feedback on their assignments in real time, be able to evaluate themselves on an ongoing basis, and ultimately receive a level of evaluation and assessment that is more equitable.

Some students also indicated that the traditional methods used in evaluating students do not provide an adequate reflection of the current use of language, and thus eliminate some of the "road-blocks" or barriers to learning that may prevent a student from becoming proficient in English. For example, these students suggested adopting AI-

structor learning through a process. One student (S6) stated, "Practising using AI, before taking an exam would give me more confidence". Another student (S24) explained, "Using technology during the exam would be a more accurate representation of what a student experiences and, as such, should assist in enhancing a student's ability to read, write, and communicate". Table 1 shows five themes along with the major emergent codes

The results of our research identify a variety of challenges that EFL course students may encounter while taking a course exam. Emotional challenges such as anxiety, speech disorders, short timeframes for completing exam answers, and challenges resulting from perceived incongruence (disparity) between what students learned in the classroom and how they were assessed) represent a significant influence on how students experience their exams. Additionally, students have expressed significant interest in receiving technology-enhanced exams that is supported with AI, as it relates to their language learning and assessment, that can provide students the opportunity to enhance their ability to complete exams and to reduce students' levels of stress during the exam process. In addition to identifying the challenges faced by students in the EFL exam process, our research concludes that assessment practices in

EMI programs must focus on including an increased emphasis on aligning course content with examinations and developing innovative and supportive assessment methodologies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the difficulties faced by the international relations students taking EMI courses in their department in Türkiye. Five major themes were identified that formed the basis for understanding these difficulties: Exam Anxiety, Difficulties with Speaking Exams, Time Constraints, A Perceived Lack of Alignment Between Teaching and Assessment, and Poor AI-Assisted Assessment Practices. These findings show that EFL course examinations challenges are not only linguistic but also include cognitive, emotional, and structural factors that impact students' overall experience of Language Learning and prepare them for their potential use of English as a Medium of Instruction.

Constructive alignment theory can be utilized as an interpretive framework for interpreting results of this study. The results indicated that there were often differences between what students engaged with in class and what was required on their exams. This indicated a disconnect between desired learning outcomes, instructional methodologies and how students would be evaluated. This disconnect could be contributing to greater levels of anxiety, decreased self-efficacy and feelings of being treated unfairly. A greater degree of alignment between teaching methodologies and assessment practices should improve student learning, while decreasing many of the issues identified in the current study of student learning.

Students reported a high level of exam anxiety was one of the most common themes. This finding is consistent with prior studies on Foreign Language Anxiety (Amiri & Ghonsooly, 2015; Markova & Yaneva, 2020; Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021) where student participants reported significant stress levels during English-language exams. The presence of this stress had a dramatically negative effect on their performance and confidence levels.

Many of the participant students indicated that their anxieties negatively impacted their ability to concentrate and recall learned materials, even when the students felt academically prepared. These results support earlier findings that indicate that students' language transfer anxiety significantly lowers students' motivation and academic success in EFL programs (Quijano & Asio, 2022). As language exams often provide the means of determining students' progression to their departmental courses, it is not surprising that anxiety was identified as a prominent theme. These findings suggest that an effective means of reducing exam-related stress would be to use formative assessment methods and support feedback systems, providing improved performance and outcomes for students.

The second major theme of the research highlights the challenges involved with assessing speaking. One major issue that arose frequently was the students' perceptions regarding their ability to produce fluid and well-structured speeches (Wang et al., 2025). In addition to the perceived stress levels associated with speaking, students reported that they lacked the opportunity to rehearse their speeches in class prior to actually performing in front of an audience, which is in line with the study of Kamaşak et al. (2021). Students shared that they felt compelled to deliver their speeches without much thought to the audience. As a result of their lack of practice, students lacked confidence in delivering their speeches and were unsure of their degree of effectiveness. In some cases, students indicated that they avoided taking part in speaking assessments because they feared embarrassment or negative judgment by their classmates or instructors. Such fear may also lead to students not successfully completing an assignment or preparing well for a speaking assessment. Thus, difficulties experienced by students during speaking assessments will have long-term ramifications on their academic and professional futures (Quijano & Asio, 2022).

The difficulties students experience in relation to EFL exam performance are multi-faceted (Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021); these students need

to understand how their cognitive and emotional responses may affect their academic success when preparing for and taking an EFL exam. According to the students' views, the most challenging aspect of EFL assessment relates to speaking assessment due to their limited availability of authentic speaking practice and the fear of making errors. Prior research also shows that productive skills such as speaking produce a higher level of anxiety for EFL learners compared to receptive skills (Putri et al., 2017). It was noted by the participants that in some instances, they did not feel adequately prepared in the area of spontaneous oral production during the exam as a result of classroom instruction. The gap that exists between how students were instructed and how they were expected to perform on exams illustrates a need for a greater number of practice-oriented and communicative activities that reflect the tasks required of students in a speaking exam. Through the use of more informal, interactive speaking exercises, and ongoing use of ongoing oral assessment throughout the semester, students could experience lower performance-based pressure and be more confident when taking the speaking assessments during the exam (Chou, 2018).

Another important barrier identified in the study was the time limit on testing. Students indicated that due to the limited amount of time given to complete the tests, many were unable to adequately demonstrate their language proficiency, particularly with respect to the reading and writing portions of the tests. When students are required to process information in a language that is not their primary language, they must exert a significantly greater amount of cognitive effort, meaning that they would require greater time, beyond what was allotted, to read and understand the directions and formulate their answers. The results of this study are consistent with previous research that indicates that students who are under time pressure experience negative impacts to language performance and increased anxiety (Opperman, 2020). Time pressure may be alleviated by modifying the length of exams, as well as including a better balance between the types of tasks included in

tests to ensure that they measure language proficiency rather than just speed.

The final major theme identified through the findings is a perceived misalignment between the content of classroom instruction and exam content. Student examination experiences in EFL can be influenced by a variety of factors, including emotional, pedagogical, social, and structural aspects (Hasirci & Cosgun, 2018; Renandya, 2013). Addressing the challenges presented by these different aspects will require a shift towards greater student engagement with assessment design, as well as increased use of innovative forms of assessment in EFL programs. In order to improve readiness for EMI and success in subsequent university studies, providing increased levels of support for speaking skills development (e.g., through the integration of both formative and digitally-based assessment methods) and improving alignment between teaching/learning and assessments would be beneficial.

This research investigated how international relations students encounter problems with taking EFL courses when taking their exams in their programs at Turkish universities. The results showed that many factors created challenges for students in EFL courses. The challenges included; being anxious about taking exams, having difficulty producing spoken English, and being pressured due to lack of time. The students indicated that they also experienced a misalignment between the way EFL courses were delivered and the manner in which students were assessed through exams and the lack of technology-based assessment methods available for EFL courses.

The findings suggest that implementing more student-centred assessment models in preparation programs would create a less stressful environment for students and increase opportunities for speaking practice as well as provide greater alignment between classroom delivery and assessment. Additionally, offering more time to complete exams and implementing forms of technology and artificial intelligence-based assessment would be an innovative approach toward improving

the EFL exam process and providing support for student development.

In addition, a holistic and flexible assessment model that meets students' needs and reflects students' academic expectations in EMI environments is needed from a pedagogical perspective. In order to create a culture of continuous learning, policymakers and curriculum developers should also consider creating alternative assessment approaches that include both formative assessment models and digital assessment tools rather than relying only on high-stakes examinations.

Additional future research could include expanding the number of universities included and various academic disciplines or a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the connection between exam-related practices and students' language proficiency and overall success in EMI programs. Despite the limitations of this study, the findings will provide valuable insight into the challenges faced by students who take EFL exams and have practical implications for improving the assessment practices of higher education language programs.

Pedagogical Implications

The outcome of this investigation is anticipated to enhance the existing body of research regarding both EFL assessments and how learners perceive them once they enter postsecondary institutions. A comprehension of the barriers that students studying international relations encounter on examinations will aid those involved in developing new assessment methods within the students' EMI program by allowing the creation of more appropriate and student-focused assessments. Curriculum producers and educators will therefore have an improved understanding of how to coordinate their teaching techniques with their assessment techniques while minimising the amount of test anxiety that students may experience before sitting for the test. As a result, enhanced learning outcomes for all students pursuing a second language will be created.

Furthermore, the study has implications for both English medium higher education policy and practice, specifically, within contexts where English language proficiency is significantly important to a student's ultimate success. By intervening on the concurrent barriers identified in this study, an increased amount of student self-efficacy, motivation towards learning and improved academic and job performance in their EFL courses will be created.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

While this research has provided significant insight into how students experience EFL course examinations, several limitations must still be taken into account when interpreting the results of this investigation. The primary limitation is that this study was conducted with a relatively small sample of only 30 students from one state university in Türkiye. The second limitation of this investigation is that only students enrolled in an international relations program were interviewed. This specific focus provided a discipline-specific perspective. The third limitation of the current study is that the data collection relied solely on semi-structured interviews and self-reporting by participants. All in all, the study does have several limitations; however, it does offer valuable qualitative information about the lived experience of students participating in EFL course examinations, which may provide valuable insights into how English education operating under EMI and their associated assessment practices may be improved.

Declarations

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