Exploring Anxiety in Speaking Exams and How it Affects Students' Performance

Betül Ayşe Sayın, Assist. Prof.Dr.
Department of English Language Teaching (ELT)
Faculty of Education
Canik Başarı University
Samsun, Turkey

Abstract

This study aims to contribute to the present studies carried on the speaking anxiety of students during oral exams, and examines a group of Turkish students in order to explore their ideas and performances about the computer-based oral exams compared to face-to-face oral exams in terms of causing anxiety. In order to lessen the students' face-to-face oral exam anxiety it is thought that computer-based oral tests can be helpful to increase speaking performance while mitigating the anxiety level. With this purpose, 28 subjects in the freshman year who enrolled to the English Language Teaching department at Canik Başarı University were measured with a questionnaire consisted of 36 items. 'Cronbach's correlation alpha' was administered to check the validity of the questionnaire, and 'Frequency and Percentile' tables were used for the interpretation of the data. The study and the questionnaire results showed that computer-based oral exams did not provide much difference on the oral exam anxiety of students despite the positive attitudes of some subjects towards computer-based exams.

Key words: Speaking skills, speaking anxiety, oral exam anxiety, face-to-face oral exam, computer-based oral exam

1.Introduction

The past twenty years have seen a real increase in the number of studies dealing with anxiety in the L2 domain, which is attributable to the significant advances in the theory and measurement of L2-related anxiety since the mid-1980s (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991a; Young, 1991, 1994; MacIntyre, 1999; Horwitz, 2001 cited in Toth, 2008). The studies were either on the test anxiety in foreign language (Sarason, 1978, Horwitz, 2001, Shomoossi & Kassaian, 2009, Paker & Höl, 2012, Shi, 2014) or on the anxiety of learning a foreign language (Wilson, 2006, Toth, 2008, Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004, Subasi, 2010, Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012) while there were also studies which examine the effects of both type of anxiety as in Phillips (1992) and Salahi & Marefat (2014).

This research study focused on oral exam anxiety which is thought an anxiety specific to the situation. It is aimed to find out whether there is a relation between the speaking ability of students and oral exams anxiety, and also search whether computer-based oral exams will help to eliminate student anxiety compared to face-to-face oral exams.

It is thought that the study will contribute to the other studies mentioned above by comparing the exam types of face-to-face oral exams with computer-based oral exams, and by making the research on students at a Turkish university.

2. Literature Review

In educational life, anxiety is usually associated with examinations. Tests and exams compose a significant part of school life and bring fear and stress as a result of anxiety for students. Anxiety is defined as "a type of cognitive response marked by self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, and self-blame" by Sarason (1978, p.195). In another definition given by Spielberger (1983), it is "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (p.1). Most people experience anxiety that is present only during a particular situation or incident, which can be considered passing, and ideally will diminish over time (Shomoossi & Kassaian, 2009).

MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991b) review of the research methods and measures concluded that it is the state anxiety which causes situation-specific language anxiety (cited in Shomoossi & Kassaian, 2009).

Test anxiety has been defined as one element of general anxiety composed of cognitive attentional processes that interferes with competent performance in academic or assessment situations (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995 cited in Shi, 2012). Test anxiety could be part of a complex array of self-preoccupations (Sarason, 1978).

In language testing, speaking exams may compose the most challenging and stressful part of the testing. Students are tested one-by-one or two as a pair and are expected to talk about on a given task. Thus, students are affected by various factors such as concentration, self-confidence, limited time, and the attitudes of the assessors during the test (Paker & Höl, 2012).

2.1. Anxiety Reasoning from Oral Examinations

Test anxiety in oral exams do not display the same reactions among students. On the contrary, while some students feel quite comfortable, others might be under a lot of stress which might affect their exam results negatively. Young (1990) found that American secondary language students preferred and felt more comfortable participating in oral activities in small groups rather than in front of the whole class (Horwitz, 2001).

Oxford and Ehrman (1995) expressed that self-reported anxiety about the oral use of language in class has a positive relationship with cognitive strategy use (Salehi & Marefat, 2014) while Phillips (1992) found a significant negative correlation between FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) scores and performance on an oral interview examination even when ability in the form of students written examination averages was statistically controlled (Horwitz, 2001). In both situations, anxiety facilitates its function as leading to success or failure of the learners which forms the distinction between 'facilitative anxiety' with a positive relation between test and anxiety, and 'debilitative anxiety' with a negative relation of the factors.

For speaking tests, there are speaking assessment scales developed and used for both face-to-face and computer-based speaking tests. The assessment criteria are determined by the experts of language assessment. Even though the criteria help to organize the speech, they are also a factor for many students that cause anxiety. Students try to prepare a speech around a topic at a limited time in consideration of a speaking rubric which is stressful to manage.

2.2. Face-to-face Oral Exams vs Computer-based Oral Exams

Face-to-face oral exams are more traditional ways of assessing speaking skills which gained importance in the last decade with the effect of both business life and job interviews, and the changing nature of language teaching. Main function of face-to-face oral exam is to provide a real-life situation for the test taker and to check speaking ability with familiar topics.

Since majority of university students need to pass a national or international English examination after graduation in order to apply and start a job, computer-based oral exams will provide an alternative for them, especially for those who would like to work and study in abroad.

When we take the two major examinations of TOEFL and IELTS applied worldwide, we meet both types of speaking exam; while TOEFL examination uses computer-based speaking test, IELTS examination uses face-to-face speaking test.

The advances in technology have influenced the increase in computer-based exams as an alternative to face-to-face oral exams (Galaczi, 2010). Computer-based oral exams have become common in the last fifteen years with also the widespread practice of skill-based English examinations such as TOEFL, TOEIC, PTE and BULATS and with their online speaking tests. The application of these type of examinations have required to make changes in teaching language skills and also the assessment system. The language teaching approaches and methods have already been focusing more on skills rather than grammar and vocabulary teaching. However, individual exam policy of institutions and their practice tests have not significantly changed to computer-based system. When we look over the situation in Turkey, computer-based test systems have been practiced basically at language courses. Some universities and their prep schools have begun to use computer-based oral exams, yet it is not still widely applied.

While it is thought that face-to-face oral exam type is easier to apply rather than computer-based exams, both exams exhibit similarities about time consideration, topic selection and the purposes of the exams.

While most students think that computer-based oral exams are more synthetic, it is supposed that computer-based oral exams may provide a stress-free environment since the students will not be directly in front of an instructor or interviewer. When students get used to the computer-exam type, they may remove their oral-exam anxiety. With the intention of investigating the effects of students' oral exam anxiety on their speaking skills, and the influence of computer-based oral exams on students, the research questions below are developed:

- ✓ Is there any relationship between foreign language speaking ability and oral exam anxiety?
- ✓ Does speaking anxiety vary according to face-to-face to computer-based oral exam types?
- ✓ Are computer-based oral exams effective to mitigate the speaking anxiety?

3. Methods of Research

3.1. Data Collection

The study was conducted at Canik Başarı University in Turkey, among 34 undergraduate students of English Language Teaching (ELT) Department of the Faculty of Education. Out of 28 participants 8 were male and 20 were female with the ages ranged from 18 to 21.

The subjects attended 'Oral Communication Skills' course for a semester. The assessment methods of the course included not only in-class participation, discussions and assignments but also a midterm and final exams which compose the main research elements of this study. The midterm exam was a classical face-to-face oral exam with their lecturer. After midterm, the lecturer had the students practice TOEFL speaking exam which was explained theoretically before midterm but was not implemented in a computerized environment. The students practiced TOEFL speaking sections in the computer lab during 5 weeks. After 5 weeks of practice, the students had a computer-based final exam. The final speaking exam of the course consisted of model questions from TOEFL speaking sections, and held in the computer lab. Afterwards, when the course and exams are over, the students were given the questionnaires which took only ten minutes for them to fill in. Besides, some students were asked to give their personal opinions about the computer-based exam.

3.2. Reliability of the Study

The data was collected with the use of a questionnaire consisted of 3 sections and 36 items. The first section of the questionnaire was intended to collect information about students' ability in speaking skills. There were 14 items in that section. The second section included 11 items on oral exam evaluation. The section included items on both face-to-face exams and computer-based oral exams. The last section of the questionnaire is adapted from Sarason's (1980) Test Anxiety Scale (TAS) and consisted of 11 items which involves two significant results of $(p<.001)$ as the factors of the Test anxiety and $(p<.005)$ as the Test anxiety $\times$ Conditions (p.205). In this study, Sarason's 11 items were used with a slight change in some statements for speaking exams in order to learn the thoughts and attitudes of students while they are in the oral exam, and to examine the situation further and deeply. For the first and the second parts of the questionnaire (25 items), Cronbach's correlation alpha was used to check the items validity and reliability. The results displayed a valid and high measure of .844.

Table 1

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.844	.833	25

Since the third section of the questionnaire is adapted, its validity and reliability are already tested and proved. Yet the third section was also included while checking the overall reliability of the items together with the first and the second, and the Cronbach's alpha was quite high when the three sections (36 items) were evaluated together with a measure of .914.

Table 2

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.914	.909	36

3.3. Data Analysis
Section 1

The table below (Table 3) illustrates the frequency and percentiles of responses which are divided into three meaningful categories for each questionnaire item.

Table 3. Students' Speaking Ability

Questionnaire Items	Never/ Hardly ever		Sometimes		Always/ Often	
	Frequency	*Percent*	*Frequency*	*Percent*	*Frequency*	*Percent*
1. I have problems in speaking English.	6	20.6%	16	55.2%	6	20.6%
2. I have difficulty in making proper sentences and explaining my idea.	8	30.1%	12	46.2%	5	19.2%
3. I am good at grammar, but I cannot speak well.	12	41.3%	2	7%	14	48.3%
4. I am good at vocabulary, but I cannot speak well.	8	27.5%	9	31%	11	37.9%
5. I am shy to answer the teacher's questions and to speak at the lessons, although I know the answer.	6	20.6%	10	34.5%	12	41.3%
6. I pronounce words quite clear and correct.	2	7%	9	31%	17	58.6%
7. I need to improve my grammar to speak better.	9	34.6%	7	26.9%	9	34.6%
8. I need to improve my vocabulary knowledge to speak better.	1	3.4%	10	34.5%	17	58.6%
9. I need to improve my pronunciation.	2	7%	13	44.8%	13	44.8%
10. I rehearse mentally what I am going to say before I speak in class.	8	28.6%	11	39.3%	8	28.6%
11. I prefer speaking activities that include pair-work	7	24.1%	12	41.4%	9	31%
12. I prefer speaking activities that include group-work.	5	18.5%	14	51.9%	7	26%
13. I enjoy role-plays.	9	31%	10	34.5%	9	31%
14. I don't like any kind of speaking activities at all.	15	51.7%	4	13.8%	9	31%

The general results of the section display that students have medium level speaking ability in English. The items 1 and 2 gives direct opinions of students on their ability in speaking skills with percentages of 55.2 and 46.2 for the response 'sometimes'. In the items 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9, the majority of student responses indicate high frequency of 'often-always' which clearly states that students do not feel competent in grammar, vocabulary, and also pronunciation. Even though they answered item 6 '*I pronounce words quite clear and correct*' with a high frequency of 'often-always' (58.6%), for item 9, 44.8% of students answered 'sometimes' and another 44.8% answered 'often-always' which acknowledge that they need to improve their pronunciation skills. And for item 7, the results for 'never-hardly ever' and 'often-always' are equal in percentages with 34.6 related with need for improvement in grammar. It is not quite clear whether they are weak in grammar, yet still displays that they need improvement in grammar which will aid their speaking ability.

The questionnaire items 11, 12, 13 and 14 illustrate students' opinion on in-class speaking activities. The statistics do not show high frequencies and percentages for 'often-always' but also not very low (as can be seen in item 14) for 'never-hardly ever'. Students express medium level of interest for speaking activities as the items 11, 12, 13 indicate.

Section 2

For this section of the questionnaire, the frequency and percentiles for the answer choices of only 'often' and 'always' are evaluated since the provided data gives sufficient information to assess the statistics.

Table 4: Face-to-face and Computer-based Oral Exam Evaluation

Questionnaire Items	Frequency	Percent
1- I feel nervous during oral exams.	21	75%
2- I feel my heart beats very fast during oral exams.	19	67%
3- Even if I am well prepared, I feel anxious during oral exams.	20	71.4%
4- I feel nervous when I start speaking in front of the instructor (teacher).	16	57.1%
5- I find it easier to have a computer-based oral exam rather than speaking with the instructor.	12	43%
6- I feel better when I have face-to-face oral exam rather than computer-based.	16	57.2%
7- I find it difficult to concentrate on what I am going to say when I speak to the computer.	14	50%
8- I find it difficult to concentrate during computer-based oral exams because of the testing environment (computer lab) and presence of other students.	16	57.2%
9- I feel stressed when I see the time running on the screen.	17	60.7%
10- I forget things I know because of stress when I talk face-to-face with the instructor.	16	57.1%
11- I prefer having computer-based oral exams.	12	43%

According to *Table 4*, majority of the responses are over 50% which reflects high frequency of oral exam anxiety. Items 1, 2 and 3 particularly display their anxiety towards oral exams without categorizing them face-to-face or computer-based. Items 4, 6 and 10 are related with face-to-face oral exams. Even though students show anxiety during this type of exams, they still prefer having face-to-face oral exam with a percentage of 57.2% to computer-based oral exams with a percentage of 43% as indicated in item 11. Besides, items 5, 7, 8 and 9 directly give the opinions of students on computer-based exams. These items illustrate anxiety and stress of students towards computer-based exams, and only 12 students with a percentage of 43 prefer having computer-based oral exam as expressed in items 5 and 11.

The overall results do not precisely indicate that students reject having computer-based exams; however, while the oral exam anxiety can be detected from the results, the preference of students towards face-to-face exams and computer-based is not very clear since the frequency and percentile rates are very close.

Section 3

The purpose of the third section of the questionnaire was to identify more specific reasons of oral exam anxiety. For this reason, the responses of students for TAS are evaluated in terms of three answer categories as in Section 1. The questionnaire items for TAS include statements that students should have replied considering the moment of oral exam. This section of the questionnaire do not compare face-to-face exams with computer-based exams. The students reflected their general opinion for both test types.

Table 5: 11 items from Sarason's Test Anxiety Scale (TAS), 1980

Questionnaire Items	Never/ Once		A few times		Often/ Very often	
	Frequency	*Percent*	*Frequency*	*Percent*	*Frequency*	*Percent*
1. I thought about how poorly I was doing.	4	14.2%	14	50%	10	35.7%
2. I wondered what the instructor would think of me.	5	18%	5	18%	18	64.3%
3. I thought about how I should work more carefully.	6	21.4%	5	18%	17	60.7%
4. I thought about how much time I had left.	1	3.6%	14	50%	20	71.4%
5. I thought about how others have done on this task.	8	28.6%	11	39.3%	9	32.1%
6. I thought about the difficulty of the questions.	6	23.1%	4	15.4%	16	61.6%
7. I thought about my level of ability.	3	10.7%	11	39.3%	14	50%
8. I thought about the purpose of the test.	7	25%	11	39.3%	10	35.7%
9. I thought about how I would feel if I were told how I performed.	6	21.4%	5	18%	17	60.7%
10. I thought about how often I got confused.	5	17.8%	8	28.6%	15	53.5%
11. I thought about things completely unrelated with the exam.	11	39.3%	7	25%	10	35.7%

The questionnaire results given in *Table 5* clearly illustrate that speaking anxiety of the students is quite high. As the items 2, 4, 6 and 9 display, it can be stated that students especially felt anxious about timing (71.4%), instructor thoughts (64.3%) and how instructor evaluate them (60.7%), and difficulty of the questions (61.6%). Item 3 also displays high frequency with 60.7%, and reflect that students are not satisfied with their responses during the exam, and they even remember the need to work harder at the time of exam. Items 7 and 10 show similar student attitudes, as well; 50% for item 7 and 53.5% for item 10 of the students' thought about their exam-time ability during the oral exam. It seems they are not distracted due to anxiety and nervousness during exam and do not think about completely unrelated things as the item 11 shows with a percentage of 39.3.

4. Results & Discussion

The results of three sections of the questionnaire display high anxiety of students towards speaking exams. The study aimed to investigate how computer-based exams can eliminate the anxiety of students; however, it can be deduced from the results that students did not show much difference towards computer-based oral exam.

When we turn back to the research questions of the study, the questionnaire results of *Section 1 and 3* show some relation in terms of answering research question 1. The results of *Section 1* (according to *Table 3*) reveals that half of the students (with an average frequency of 13) think that they have medium level speaking ability while another half (with an average frequency of 13) think they have low level speaking ability. The average percentages for the answer choice 'sometimes' is 44.75, and for 'often-always' is 46.3. The close averages of both answer choice about speaking ability indicate that students do not feel themselves competent in speaking skills, and they may even be critical of their own ability since they were the students of English Language Teaching (ELT) department. However, high percentages of oral exam anxiety was displayed in *Table 5* of *Section 3* with 31% as the average percentages for the answer choice 'a few times' and 51% for the choice 'often-very often'. The results of both *Section 1 and 3* indicate that students have substantial problems in speaking skills. Here, it can be stated that there is a relation between students' low or medium level speaking ability and oral exam anxiety. The second research question of 'whether speaking anxiety varies according to face-to-face to computer-based oral exam types' and the third question of 'whether computer-based oral exam is effective to mitigate the speaking anxiety can be evaluated depending on the analysis done for *Table 4* in *Section 2*.

The overall results indicated that students do not have precise preference of face-to-face or computer-based oral exams since they show anxiety in both exam type. Although it seems that students tend to prefer face-to-face exams with a percentage of 57.2%, items 4 and 10 illustrate that they feel excited during face-to-face exams, as well. It can be rendered that both exam types cause anxiety for students, and speaking anxiety do not vary depending on the exam type. Students' first experience of computer-based oral exam type during a 5 weeks period was not enough to mitigate their anxiety. Even though some students met this new type of oral exam quite well, more than half of the students were anxious and had hesitations which were uttered during their first exposure with practice tests, and they also reflected their displeasure at the time of final exam. As a result, computer-based oral exam did not prove to be effective during a short period of time.

It can be concluded from the results that even though students have anxiety during computer-based oral exam, being exposed more to this type of exam might mitigate student anxiety to a high percentage and change student thoughts and ideas towards computer-based exam. Despite their first exposure to computer-based oral exam system, the results did not completely fail to support the possibility of increasing the application of this type of exam. The spread of both the idea and application of the computer-based oral exams in Turkish high-stakes testing system might bring better results in improving students speaking skills and eliminate speaking anxiety. Besides, the inclusion of a computer-based oral exam will change the attitude towards learning and teaching speaking skills.

5. Conclusion

The study has explored the oral exam anxiety levels of students during computer-based oral exams compared to face-to-face oral exams. The research results based on questionnaire analysis indicated that computer-based oral exams did not help to eliminate or reduce oral exam anxiety, and subjects displayed similar attitudes to both exam type. It cannot be directly interpreted from the results yet it can be stated that the inexperience of students of a computer-based exam before, and experimenting it for the first time may be considered as a factor effecting the results. It is believed that if students get used to have computer-based oral exams, they might change their opinion towards the exam, or their exam anxiety will be reduced. More groups and more studies with expanded exposure time are needed to support our belief that computer-based oral exams will be more stress-free and practical for test-takers.

References

Galaczi, E. D. (2010). Face-to-face and computer-based assessment of speaking: challenges and opportunities. In E. Editor (L. Araujo), *Computer-based Assessment (CBA) of Foreign Language Speaking Skills* (pp. 29-51). Retrieved from https://www.testdaf.de/fileadmin/Redakteur/PDF/Forschung-Publikationen/Volume_European_Commission_2010.pdf

Horwitz, E. K. (2001). Language anxiety and achievement. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol.21, Cambridge University Press.

Oxford, R. L., & Ehrman, M. E. (1995). Adults language learning strategies in an intensive foreign language program in the United States. *System*, 23 (3), 359-86.

Paker, T. & Höl, D. (2012). Attitudes and perceptions of the students and instructors towards testing speaking communicatively. Pamukkale Universitesi Egitim Fakultesi Dergisi, 32 (2), 13-24.

Salehi, M. & Marefat, F. (2014). The effects of foreign language anxiety and test anxiety on foreign language test performance: Theory and practice in language studies. *Academy Publisher*, Finland, 4 (5), 931-940.

Sarason, I. G. (1978). The test anxiety scale: Concept and research. In C.D. Spielberger & I.G. Sarason (Eds.), *Stress and Anxiety Vol. 5*. Hemisphere Publishing Corp, Washington D.C.

Shi, F. (2012). Exploring Students' Anxiety in Computer-based Oral English Test, *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 3 (3), 446-451, Academy Publisher, Finland

Shomoossi, N. & Kassaian, Z. (2009). Variation of test anxiety over listening and speaking test performance. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies*, 3 (1), 65-78.

Spielberger, C. D. (1983). Manual for the state-trait anxiety inventory. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Spielberger, C. D. & Vagg P. R. (1995). Test anxiety: A transactional process model. In C. D. Spielberger & P.R. Vagg (Eds.), *Test anxiety: Theory, assessment and treatment.* Washington, D. C.: Taylor & Francis.

Toth, Z. (2008). A foreign language anxiety scale for Hungarian learners of English, WoPalP 2

Young, D. J. (1990). An investigation of students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. *Foreign Language Annuals*, 23, 539-553.