

# ULUSLARARASI SOSYAL ARAŐTIRMALAR DERĐİŐİ THE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

Uluslararası Sosyal Arařtırmalar Dergisi / The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 14 Sayı: 77 Nisan 2021 & Volume: 14 Issue: 77 April 2021

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

## FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH SPEAKING OF TURKISH STUDENTS

**Mohammad Shah ZAKI\***

### **Abstract**

This paper looks at the factors affecting the English spoken by Turkish students learning English. The research took place in one of the private language institutes in Istanbul, Turkey. Of the fifty participants, twenty-five were males and twenty-five were females. The participants' age range was between sixteen and twenty-two years of age. The research showed that lack of opportunity to speak, fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, and not being comfortable speaking in the class are negative factors affecting their speaking ability. In addition, lack of speaking and listening, different grammar structures of Turkish and English, lack of vocabulary, shyness, and, most importantly, thinking in the first language and then translating in the target are other factors hindering progress. To counter these obstacles, this paper recommends that teachers create a natural environment, be patient with learners, and build confidence while teaching.

**Keywords:** Speaking, Listening, Natural Environment, Self-Confidence, Grammar Structures, Shyness, Vocabulary.

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\* Istanbul Aydin University, English Language and Literature, ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8004-2870>



### **Introduction:**

The four language skills are reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Although, all four skills have significant roles in learning a language, speaking is the foremost communicative skill in second- or foreign language learning. The disadvantages of poor-speaking skills are obvious. A large percentage of every day communication is oral, and participation in a social context is one of the main goals in language learning (Schemitt, 2012). However, in the nineteenth century foreign language teachers thought that the ability to communicate meant grammar and the main role of teaching was to teach grammar. At that time the Grammar-Translation Method was popularized (Celce-Murica, 2001). Even today many teachers still focus on grammar because it requires nothing more than a textbook or some writing paper. On the other hand, speaking is a complex skill and requires other people as listeners. For that reason, learners should learn in groups (Celce-Murica, 2001).

And there are other questions. Are there influences on speaking ability from the learners' native language or their classroom culture? And for this paper, what specific factors influence the English speaking of Turkish students?

This study took place in a classroom over nine months. The first observation of note was that Turkish students speaking ability lagged far behind their grammar skills. A second observation was that other skills like listening and reading played a significant role in improving speaking skills. Generally, the learners did not speak in the target language inside and outside of the class; instead, they spoke in their mother tongue. This hindered their progress, because, whereas input is important for language learning, output is far more important in learning to speak a language. A child who speaks a language neither knows grammatical structure nor has the ability to read or write (Rahnama, M., Fatehi Rad, N., & Bagheri, H, 2016, 1-7). Learning to speak requires a lot of practice.

### **Aim of the study**

The research took place in a language center in Istanbul over more than seven months, and most of the students were Turks. Right from the beginning of this period, it was obvious that the students had greater problems in speaking English than with grammar and writing. The aim of this research is to find out why the students lag in speaking skills. What are the reasons and factors that put obstacles on the path to their progress?

### **Importance of the study**

Finding better ways to improve English language speaking has obvious benefits for both second language learners and teachers. If this study can locate the causes of the problem and suggest solutions, it will help teachers in the classroom and students may become aware of their weaknesses and be able to take steps to counter them.

### **Research question**

This study will focus on this question:

1. What are the factors that affect the English-speaking performance of Turkish students?

### **Research limitations**

There were several limitations while implementing this project. First, it was difficult to gather all the participants (Turkish students) to answer the questionnaires at the same time because of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, because students were not coming regularly to language institutes. Secondly, the majority of English language learners at the institute were foreigners, especially from Middle Eastern countries, so it was difficult to find a sufficient number of Turkish students to participate. Third, very few comparable research projects exist, especially in the Turkish context, which would have aided analysis.

### **Literature review**

Since the globalization of the world economy and widespread use of the internet, people have been trading and interacting with one another in today's lingua franca, English, via Skype, FaceTime, and the like. This globalization has created a need for listening and speaking skills in English. Many researchers in the field of English Language Teaching (hereafter ELT) have been investigating how they can develop these skills in foreign/second (hereafter L2) learners and suggesting techniques for the teachers. However, the reasons that prevent L2 learners from improving their speaking ability is often one of many learning obstacles and is seldom the focus of research.



One of the reasons is the topical knowledge that impedes language learning. Many English language teachers have admitted that students' speaking performance has directly been affected by topical knowledge. Bachman & Palmer (1996, as cited in Mai & Tuan, 2015, & Leong & Ahmadi, 2017, 9-16) defined topical knowledge as the knowledge structures in long-term memory. That is, it is the speakers' knowledge of relevant topics. Topical knowledge provides information to enable learners to use language concerning the world in which they live. Bachman & Palmer (1996, as cited in Mai & Tuan, 2015, & Leong & Ahmadi, 2017, 9-16) assert that those with the relevant topical knowledge might do certain test tasks more easily in comparison with those who do not have it. Moreover, they believe that topical knowledge has a great impact on learners' speaking performance.

Others highlighted the influence of listening ability on speaking performance. Language learners should prioritize the development of listening ability in order to improve their speaking ability. In other words, to have successful interaction or communication, learners need to understand what is said to them Doff (1998, as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017, 36-38). According to Shumin (1997, as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017, 36-38) whenever students talk to each other, they answer it based on the listening process. Speakers, thus, also have the role of listeners, so, if learners do not understand what is uttered, they are not able to reply to it. In short, speaking is very closely related to the listening skill (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

Motivation and lack of confidence can be other reasons that prevent second language learners from speaking. Motivation is a key factor in language learners' success. It either influences or is influenced by language learning components, Songsiri (2007, as cited in Al Nakhalah, 2016, 101-103). Nunan (1999, as cited in Al Nakhalah, 2016, 101-103), for example, points out that motivation can be the reason for reluctance to speak in English. Furthermore, it is seen as a key and important consideration to determine learners' preparation for communication. Another researcher, Zua (2008, as cited in Al Nakhalah, 2016, 101-103), acknowledges that "motivation is an inner energy. She says that no matter what kinds of motivation the learners possess it will enhance their study interest" (p. 103). Many studies have shown that students who have a strong motivation will continue to learn and will obtain better scores in comparison with those who have weak motivation to succeed. It is recommended for teachers to build students' motivation to learn a language (Al Nakhalah, 2016). Leong and Ahmadi (2017) stated that "without positive attitudes towards the speaking performance, the aim of speaking will not be obtainable for learners" (p. 38).

Another factor that affects English language speaking is confidence. It often happens when language learners feel their conversation partners or other speakers do not understand them. As a result, learners would prefer to stay silent when others talk (Al Nakhalah, 2016). Nunan (1999, as cited in Al Nakhalah, 2016) summarized it as "students who lack confidence about themselves and their English necessarily suffer from communication apprehension" (p. 103). In these cases, teachers need to find ways to build students' confidence. Teachers can turn to theoretical research on the topic of student confidence and also on their practical experience (Al Nakhalah, 2016). For example, putting students in pairs, rather than asking them to speak in front of the class is a way to build confidence. In many cases, lack of confidence is a fear of making mistakes due to lack of knowledge about accurate pronunciation, grammatical structures, and appropriate vocabularies for interactions (Alasmari 2015, as cited in Alzhrani, 2019, 49-50).

Another researcher, Nascente (2001, as cited in Al Nakhalah, 2016, 101-103), claims that anxiety is one of the most influential factors and has an impact on students' language learning. Horwitz (1991, as cited in Al Nakhalah, 2016), for example, believes that "anxiety...can influence the quality of oral language production and make individuals appear less fluent than they are" (p. 102), and Woodrow (2006, as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017) said that "anxiety has a negative effect on the oral performance of English speakers" (p. 38). Likewise, Tanveer (2007, as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017) emphasized that "the high anxiety lowers the learners' speaking performance" (p.38). Teachers, therefore, need to create a calm atmosphere which is conducive to learning.

In many cases, a number of factors will combine to hinder learning. The findings indicate that a shortage of language speaking practice, using a mixture of languages, and not having language speaking practice in the classrooms were the key points of students' weakness in language speaking ability. Researcher Al Nakhalah made a list of the factors that caused speaking difficulties for language learners:

1. Being shy, fear of making mistakes, and being criticized while speaking in front of the class.
2. Students who shared the same mother tongue in a language class preferred to interact in their mother tongue.
3. Inadequate vocabularies to get their meaning across, and a lack of awareness of communication strategies to speak in front of the students.



4. Lack of motivation in expressing themselves.
5. The target language environment, and a shortage of and less accessibility to real-life situations.
6. Discourse participation (p.105).

Long and Ahmadi (2017) stated that although learners have adequate linguistic skills, low self-esteem, higher anxiety, and low motivation can hinder their speaking skills. They argued that students can speak easily and effectively when they have higher motivation and lower anxiety. They stated that:

teachers should understand their students' interests and feelings, improve their learners' self-confidence, and choose the teaching method to keep their learners involved in the speaking activity and praise their students to speak English. (p. 39)

They gave recommendations to teachers. First, students should practice English speaking orally; secondly, to avoid anxiety, students should be encouraged to speak even if they make mistakes in their communication, and they should not be criticized directly. In addition, to avoid anxiety, fear of being criticized, and shyness, students should be aware of their speaking partner. Thirdly, the teacher motivates language learners not to use their mother tongue, and students, themselves must have the motivation to communicate in the target language. Fourthly, to increase students' vocabularies, the teacher should encourage them to read more and motivate them to speak in English. Finally, the teacher should provide a speaking environment, let students join discourse to help them speak in English, and build self-confidence in them. In addition to the above findings, another study which was conducted by Al-Khasawneh, *et al.* (2016) which recommended that teachers provide a suitable platform to encourage learners to interact orally, which would encourage them to express concepts and concrete meaning. Language learners become very interested in oral communication and interaction activities, when they express concrete meaning.

### **Methodology and Procedure**

The current study sought to learn by means of a survey which specific factors hindered speaking progress among Turkish English language learners.

#### **Participants**

A survey containing multiple-choice questions was given to Turkish students learning English. Participants were randomly selected from intermediate English classes, because they were capable of speaking and answering the questions, but not yet fluent in the language. Their English was good enough to evaluate the obstacles or challenges confronting regarding speaking English. Fifty Turkish students participated in this study, including 25 males and 25 females, and their ages ranged from 17 to 22 years old. Respondents in this study have been studying English language for more than eight months.

#### **Instruments**

The questionnaires given to the students can be found in Appendix A. The draft of the questionnaires was prepared based on students' feedback, previous studies, published and unpublished theses, and articles related to the study. The Questionnaires contained three parts: first were multiple choice questions, second, open-ended questions which sought personal points of view, and in the third part, participants were able to select more than one option. Answers were handwritten on the questionnaires. After students completed them, the questionnaires were reviewed and edited by an authorized person (the author's research advisor).

#### **Procedures**

Before implementing this study, permission was obtained from the subject teachers to get their consent and schedule a time to administer the survey. The purpose of the study and the directions for answering the questionnaires were explained to the respondents before administering the questionnaires. Initially, participants were requested to complete the informed consent form; after that, the researcher distributed questionnaires to collect the required data. The researcher gave respondents enough time to answer every question carefully.

The survey was distributed in one of the private language institutes in Istanbul, Turkey. Although Istanbul is an historical city with many attractive touristic sites and many tourists, the majority of the younger generation of Turks either do not know English or do not put much value in speaking it. Some younger people, however, go to language institutes to learn English. In one of these institutes, this survey was administered.

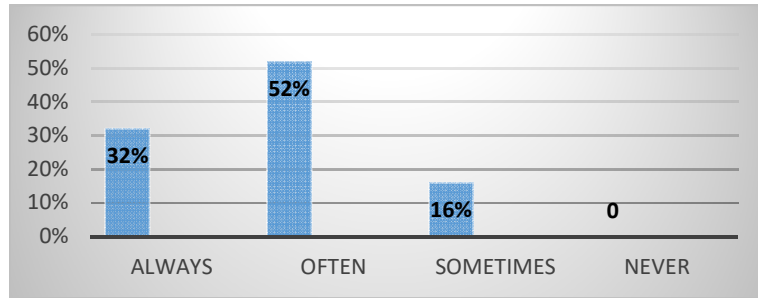


## Findings

The findings are as follows.

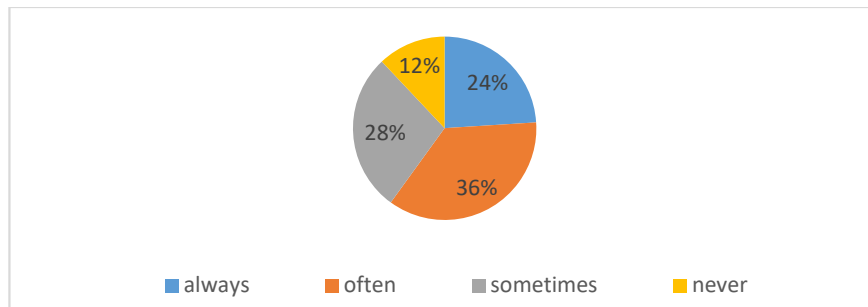
Of the fifty students who participated in the survey, 52% of them said they are allowed to speak English in the classroom. 32% of them said that they had always the opportunity to speak in English in the classroom. The other remaining 16% asserted that sometimes they had a chance to speak in English in the class, but nobody selected the option Never. Figure 1 shows the results of Question 1.

Figure 1: I am given the opportunity to speak English in my classroom.



Regarding the second question, 36% of the participants claimed that they often had the opportunity to socialize outside of the classroom and talk English with outsiders: teachers, classmates, and others. 28% of them said that sometimes they had a chance to socialize outside of the classroom. 24% of the research participants stated that they had always this opportunity. However, the remaining 12% of the participants stated that they never had the opportunity to socialize in English outside of the classroom. See figure 2.

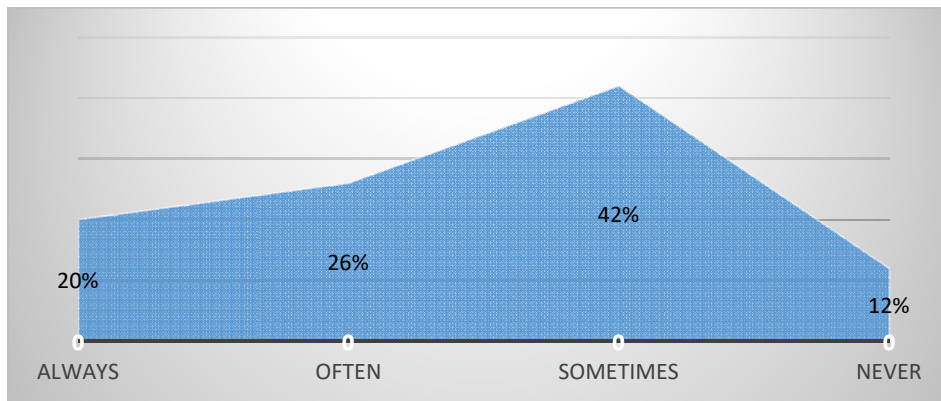
Figure 2: I am also given the opportunity to socialize outside of the classroom.



Question Three asks about their confidence in speaking English. 42% of the participants sometimes had full confidence in speaking English in the class, and 26% of them expressed that they often had confidence to speak English in the class. It should be mention that 20% of research participants always were fully confident and 12% were never fully confident to speak English in the class. They acknowledged that they felt more relaxed to speak in their native language in the class than English. Question 3 is shown in Figure 3 below.

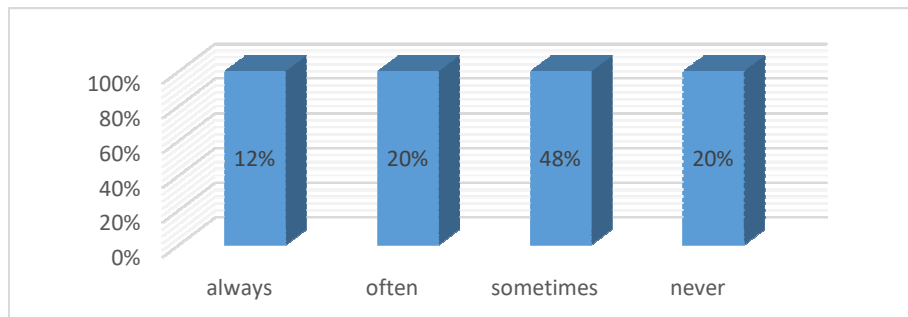


Figure 3: I have full confidence in speaking English in the class.



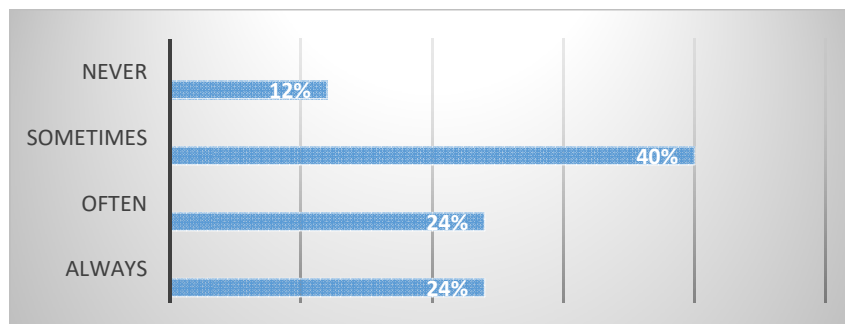
Question Four asks them about their fear of making mistakes. 48% of the students said that they sometimes worried about making mistakes while speaking in English in front of their classmates, and 20% of them said that they often worried about making mistakes while speaking English in class. However, 20% asserted that they never worried about making mistakes while speaking English, and only 12% of the participants claimed that they always worried about making mistakes when they speak English in the classroom. Figure 4 shows their responses.

Figure 4: I am worried that I will make mistake when speaking English in class.



About speaking comfort, 40% of the participants of the study mentioned that they were sometimes comfortable speaking English in the class, and 24% said that they often were comfortable. Only 24% of the participants said that they were always comfortable to communicate in English in the class and 12% asserted that they never felt comfortable. Figure 5 illustrates these responses.

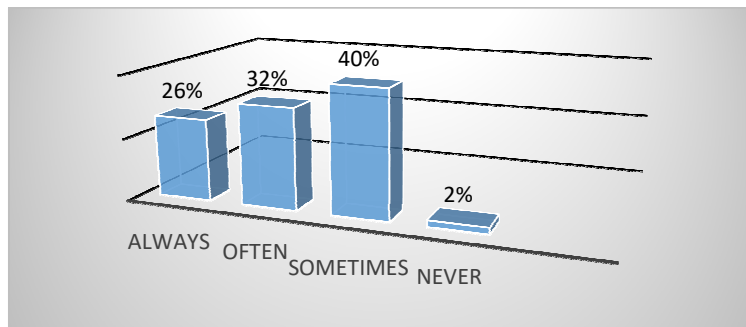
Figure 5: I am comfortable speaking English in the class.



Regarding motivation, 40% of the participants stated that they sometimes had the motivation to speak English, and 32% of them asserted that they often had the motivation to speak English in the class. About 26% of the students said that they always had the motivation to speak English, but only 2% stated that they never had the motivation to speak in the class. Figure 6 shows these responses.

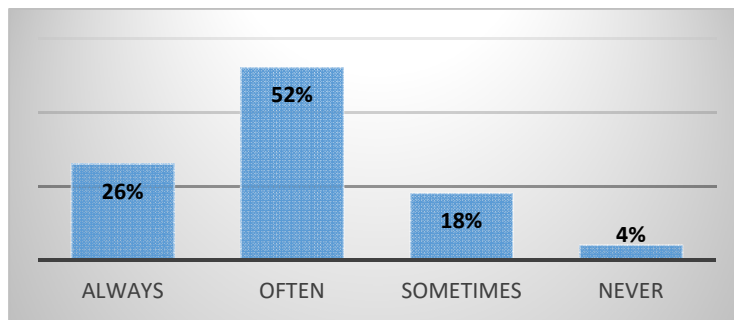


Figure 6: I have the motivation to speak English in class.



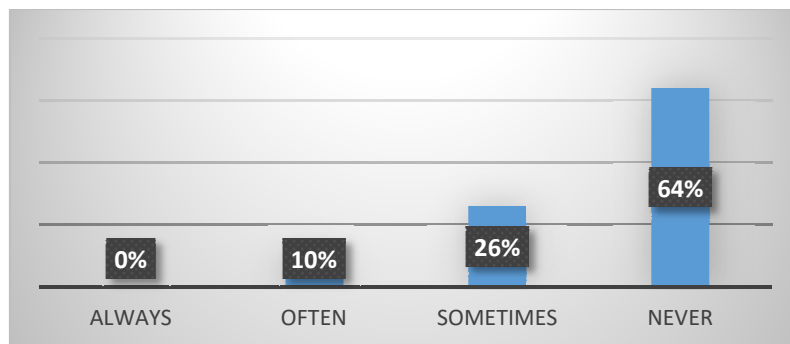
Regarding creating a natural environment for students to speak English in the classroom, 52% of respondents said that they often had such an environment in the class, and 26% of the participants claimed that they always had such an environment. 18% of the students stated that they sometimes tried to create a natural environment to speak English, but only 4% said that they never created the environment to speak English in the classroom with others. Figure 7 shows their responses.

Figure 7: I try to create a natural environment for me to speak English in the classroom.



Question 8 was about the students' concern for their image with other students. 64% of the participants said that they never feel sorry for what their classmates think while they speak English in the class. 26% of them stated that they sometimes feel sorry for what they think while they speak English in the class. The remaining 10% of the students mentioned that they often feel sorry for what their classmates think while speaking English in the class, but nobody selected always. See Figure 8 below.

Figure 8: When I speak English I feel sorry for what other students in the class think of me.

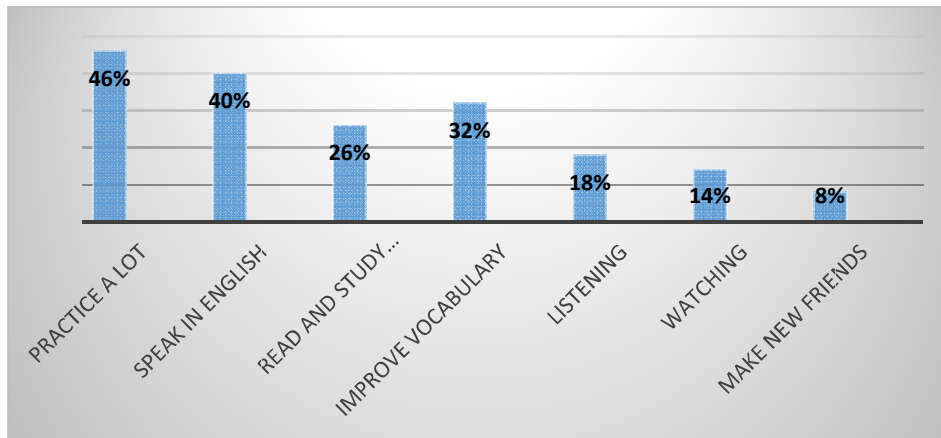


Question 9 asked students what they thought they should do to improve their English speaking-ability. Of the respondents, 46% said that practicing a lot is one of the best ways to learn a language. 40% stated that speaking in English in the class or with classmates outside of the class is good to enhance speaking English ability. 26% believe that reading English books and studying hard also facilitate English communication, and 32% stated that memorizing and improving vocabulary plays a key role in English language interactions. Moreover, 28% of the participants selected the listening option, and 14% watching. Respondents seem to say that listening and watching not only improve speaking English ability but also enhance the overall understanding of a language in the real context. 8% of the participants believed that



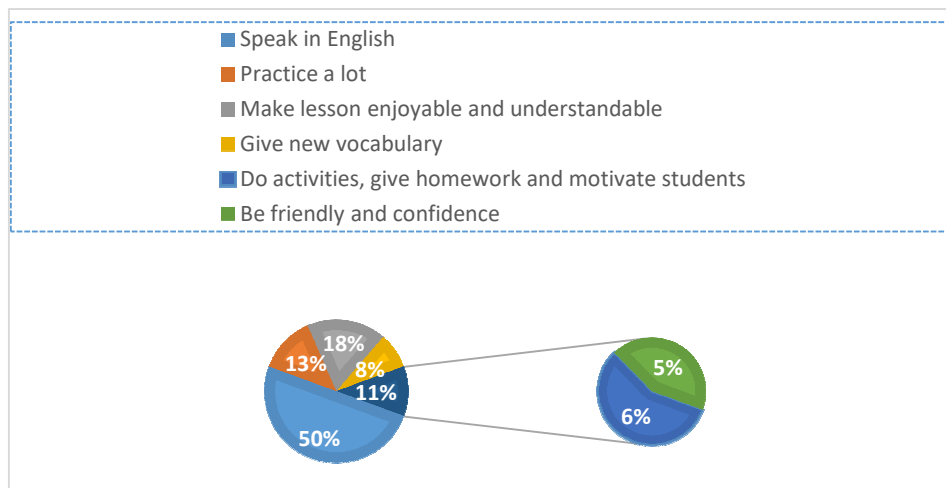
making new friends who interact in English is another way to improve communication ability and learn the language in a very natural way. See Figure 9 below.

Figure 9: What do you think you should do to gain the ability to speak English?



The students who participated in this study highlighted the role of their teachers in improving their English speaking skills. 50% of them said that teachers should speak in English while presenting the lesson or any other activities. 13% of the other participants stated that practicing the language a lot would enhance their communication skills. 18% of the research participants believed that how the lesson is presented has a key role, too. They added that the teacher should make the lesson enjoyable, understandable, and should know the level of the students while presenting. 8% of them asserted that a teacher should give new vocabulary, especially those which have a daily frequency of usage. 6% of the participants asked for teachers to do class activities, give homework, and motivate students whenever they participate in the lesson. Among them, 5% believed that teachers should be friendly with the students as well as have confidence while presenting the lesson or any required activities. Figure 10 shows their responses.

Figure 10: What should the teacher do to improve your English-speaking skills.

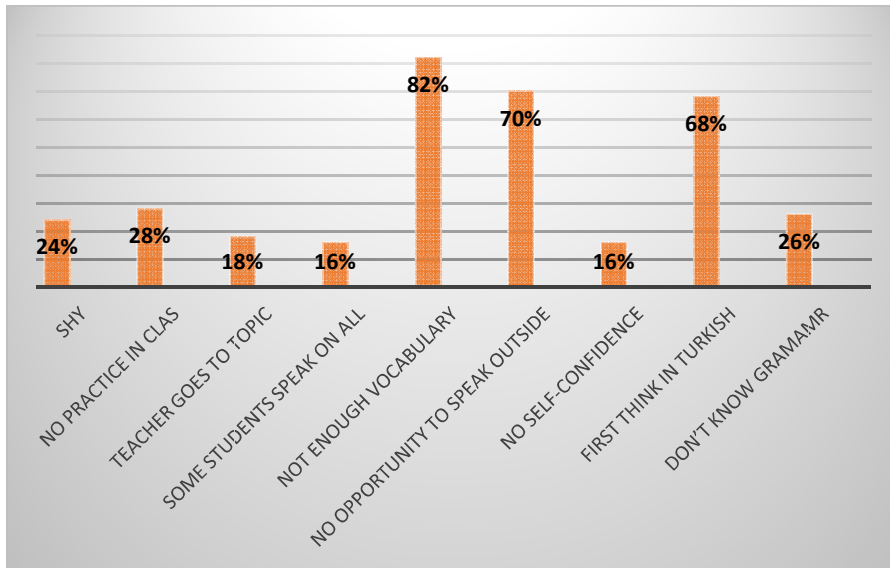


The last question asked the reason or reasons for students not making progress in English speaking skills. Of those questioned, 82% said that they *don't have enough vocabulary*. At the same time, 70% claimed that they *don't have the opportunity to speak English outside of the classroom*. Also, 68% of the participants stated that they *first think in Turkish and then try to explain or talk in English*. A smaller number (26%) asserted that they *don't know English grammar*, 16% said that they *have not self-confidence* while speaking English in the classroom, and another 16% said that *only some students are speaking, but not everyone is given a chance to speak English in the class*. Other reasons included 18% who claimed that *the teacher goes through the topic very quickly* and 28% of them asserted that they *don't have much speaking practice in the class*. Lastly, 24% stated that *shyness* is one factor that causes them not to develop English speaking skills. Figure 11 shows the participants' responses.





Figure 11: What reason or reasons below explain your lack of English-speaking skill progress? You can mark more than one reason.



## Discussion

Communicating with new words and grammar while learning a new language has its challenges and obstacles. The difficulties for language learning and communicating depend on the language structures, and the people who learn them. The English language is one of the most frequently learned and communicated languages in the world. The current study which was conducted in an English language institute tried to discover the factors affecting English speaking of Turkish students. The results revealed that several factors affect their English-speaking ability.

The first factor was the opportunity to speak in English. The participants of this study stated that lack of opportunity to speak in English either in the class or outside the class is one of the main factors hindering progress for these Turkish students. Ironically, many participants mentioned that they often have the opportunity to speak in the class, but most of the time everybody communicates in their mother tongue instead of the target language. Likewise, they claimed that they have the opportunity to socialize outside class in the target language, but similarly, they choose to talk in their mother tongue.

The second factor was related to the first and focused on the lack of listening and speaking practice either inside or outside of the classroom to improve language communication skills. In this study, most of the participants claimed not practicing speaking and listening skills is a major factor affecting their communication ability. Some requested further attention and focus on enhancing these two skills of the language. Similarly, Shumin (1997, as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017) has asserted that whenever students talk to each other, they answer it through the listening process, so listening skills play a role in improving speaking ability. Thus, if learners do not understand what is uttered, they are not able to reply to it. In short, speaking is very closely related to listening skills (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

The third factors were motivation and confidence while learning to communicate in English. This study showed that motivating students to participate in the lesson and building self-confidence are two very important points. Likewise, lack of motivation and lack of self-confidence can be other reasons that prevent second language learners from speaking. Motivation is a key factor in language learners' success, and it either influences or is influenced by language learning components, Songsiri (2007, as cited in Al Nakhalah, 2016). Another researcher Zua (2008, as cited in Al Nakhalah, 2016) stated that "Motivation is an inner energy. She says that no matter what kinds of motivation the learners possess it will enhance their study interest" (p. 103).

Other factors which were highlighted in this study and other studies were grammar structures, vocabulary, usage of mother tongue, fear of mistakes, shyness, and anxiety. In this research, the participants stated that the difference between Turkish and English grammar structures as well as vocabularies made learning the target language difficult. In addition, asking students to communicate in front of the class and fear of making mistakes compounded the problems due to inaccurate pronunciation, grammatical



structures, and appropriate vocabularies for interactions (Alasmari 2015, as cited in Alzhrani, 2019). Some of the participants also said that they were too shy to speak in English in front of the class.

In a conclusion, the findings suggested that in order to improve speaking skills while learning English, teachers need to be aware of the obstacles to learning and should provide opportunities for learners to use the target language widely. The findings also suggested that teachers should create a natural environment for students, use the target language in the class, motivate students, and create a friendly environment so that everyone feels comfortable in the class and participates in the lesson. Other findings suggest that students should practice speaking and listening skills whenever possible, and should read books, study the lessons, and join the class fully prepared. Furthermore, to overcome these factors for Turkish students of English, students and teachers should work cooperatively to minimize these challenges and factors.

## Conclusion

English is the most frequently learned and used language in the world. Despite ideal language learning facilities, modern technology, soft and hard copies of up-to-date books, there are still factors affecting the English-speaking ability of second language learners. This research article focused on the factors affecting English Speaking of Turkish Students. This study attempted to discover the main factors and challenges confronting language learners. A survey of participants revealed that lack of listening and speaking practice among language learners both inside and outside the class, large differences in grammatical structures between the native and target languages, lack of vocabulary, and always starting speaking by building sentences in their mother tongue were detrimental factors to speaking English. In addition, shyness, lack of self-confidence, using their mother tongue in the class also affected their English language learning and speaking.

Two suggestions are that English language teachers should have more confidence while presenting the lesson and have patience when trying to solve students' problems. Teachers should provide a natural environment for language learners, be friendly, and motivate students, give positive feedback, and encourage them to participate in the class. Also, teachers should speak the target in the class, make and give a chance for the students to use the target language even if the student uses only one word. Group work and pair work should be employed often in the class, because it gives the teacher a chance to monitor the students' progress and gives the students a chance to share their ideas and learn through exchanging ideas with peers. Students also need to be hard-working, diligent, fully prepared for the class, follow all the directions, do the assignments, and participate in classroom activities.

In conclusion, the findings of this article revealed that many factors affect learning new language speaking and it is necessary for teachers to be aware of the obstacles which may be hindering their students' progress.

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