

# Konu Aşinalığının İngilizce Öğrencilerinin Konuşma Puanlarına Etkisi

## Impact of the Topic Familiarity on EFL Students' Speaking Scores

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### Özet

Konu aşinalığı, sözlü değerlendirme açısından önemli bir kavramdır. Öğrencilerin başarısını etkileyen bir takım faktörler (sınıf içi etkinliklerle veya öğrencilerin arka plan bilgisi ile hazırlıkları gibi) vardır. Ayrıca, sınavlardan önce “sınav” konularına aşina olmak, öğrencilerin sınav performansına katkıda bulunabilir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma öğrencilerin sınav öncesi sınav konularına aşina olmalarının öğrencilerin konuşma puanları üzerinde olumlu bir etkisi olup olmadığını araştırmıştır. Çalışma Gaziantep Üniversitesi Yabancı Diller Yüksek Okulu'nda 245 öğrenci ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler üç aşamada toplanmıştır. İlk ve ikinci aşamada, öğrencilerin konuya aşina oldukları konuyla ilgili iki farklı uygulama arasındaki fark incelenmiştir. Üçüncü aşama, öğrencilerin uygulama hakkındaki görüşlerini ile ilgili veri toplandı. Sonuçlar, öğrencilerin sınavdan önce konuşma konularına aşina olmalarının öğrencilerin konuşma sınavı puanları üzerinde hiçbir fark yaratmadığını ortaya koymuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Konuşma sınavı, konu aşinalığı, konuşma sınavına hazırlık

### Abstract

Topic familiarity is an important issue for oral assessment. There may be factors such as readiness through in-class activities or background knowledge of the students that affect students' success. Furthermore, familiarity with the 'speaking exam' topics before the exams may contribute to this issue. Therefore, this study investigated if students' familiarity with the 'speaking exam' topics before the exams has a positive effect on students' speaking scores or not. The study was conducted at Gaziantep University School of Foreign Languages with 245 students and 25 interviewers. The data were collected by means of interviews in three stages. The first and second stages were to examine the differences between two different implementations about students' speaking topic familiarity. The third stage was to investigate the opinions of the students about the implementation. The results revealed that the students' un/familiarity with the speaking topics before the exams made no difference on the students' speaking scores.

**Keywords:** Speaking tests, topic familiarity, preparation for the speaking test

### Introduction

As long as four language skills are thought, they should be tested because any skill which is not tested is simply ignored by the students (Parker, 2013). In this context, speaking assessment is also a vital part of overall foreign language assessment as it is directly related to students' performance. When students' speaking performances are assessed, two important things should be taken into consideration: microskills and macroskills. As Brown (2000, p.142) indicates:

Microskills produce differences among English phonemes and allophonic variants, chunks of language of different lengths, English stress patterns, rhythmic structure, and intonation contours, reduced forms of words and phrases, an adequate number of lexical units (words), fluent speech, various strategic devices— pauses, fillers, self-corrections, backtracking, grammatical word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), systems (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralisation), word order, patterns, rules, and elliptical forms, a particular meaning in different grammatical forms, cohesive devices in spoken discourse. Macroskills produce communicative functions, appropriate styles, registers, implicature, redundancies, pragmatic conventions, conversation rules, interrupting, and other sociolinguistic features in face-to-face conversations, connections between events, events and feelings, new information and given information, generalization and exemplification, facial features, kinesics, and other nonverbal cues along with verbal language, a battery of speaking strategies, such as emphasizing key words, rephrasing, providing a context for interpreting the meaning of words, appealing for help, and accurately assessing how well your interlocutor is understanding you.

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During the assessment process, the constituent parts of microskills and macroskills can be performed through the speaking topics. Ruth and Murphy (1988, p.253) stated “no topic can absolutely guarantee equal access to knowledge of the subject matter for all participants in a test. But some topics provide more opportunities than others”. As Chou Hare and Devine (1983, p.159) stated:

Chance and life circumstances that dictate world knowledge levels seem to exert a powerful influence on comprehension, in spite of professed disinterest in a given topic. Conversely, inadequate background knowledge may thwart attempts at understanding, in spite of observed motivation and enthusiasm over a listening or reading activity.

He and Shi (2012) suggest that a lack of topical knowledge in relation to particular task prompts may place ESL students at a risk of failing a timed impromptu writing test. Moreover, Khabbazzbashi (2017, p.23) concludes that participants’ different levels of background knowledge were shown to have a systematic effect on performance, however, these statistically significant differences also failed to translate into practical significance.

Additionally, results of the comparisons of processing strategies across different levels of language proficiency and prior knowledge revealed that both these factors exert significant effects on the frequency and types of processing strategies EAP (English for Academic Purposes) readers employ while dealing with multiple technical documents (Karimi, 2018, p.235).

Furthermore, Mahmoudi and Mahmoudi state that topic familiarity cannot override language proficiency in reading comprehension; that is, low-proficiency students could not catch up with high-proficiency students even in familiar topics (2017).

There can be different factors that affect students’ speaking performance. Foreign language anxiety has a debilitating effect on the oral performance of speakers of English as a second language (Woodrow, 2006, p.308). In this context, familiarity with the speaking topics can reduce students’ anxiety, which has an effect on students’ grades. The rater comments in the study of Khabbazzbashi (2015, p.44) suggested that when encountering an unfamiliar topic, some individuals appeared to ‘be caught off-guard’, feel ‘baffled’, ‘surprised’ or at times, ‘scared’ and that candidates could not really use complex grammar or lexis when saying that they know nothing about a topic. Additionally, comprehension of spoken material may depend on the degree of the listener’s familiarity with the speaker's accent and background knowledge, and the problems of the listeners can be different from each other (Kitao & Kitao, 1996).

In the light of the studies above, it can be said that familiarity with speaking topics is important to oral language assessment as it affects students’ foreign language success. All of the above mentioned studies have contributed to the “topic familiarity” issue in writing, reading, listening, and speaking exams. They include background knowledge and proficiency levels of the students. There are also studies about the factors (such as anxiety and washback effect) that affect students’ oral performances. However, whether the students’ familiarity with the ‘speaking exam’ topics before the exams has any possible effect on their success or not is an unexplored territory in the literature field. In line with the purposes of the study, the following research question was constructed: Does students’ topic familiarity have a positive effect on students’ speaking exam scores?

## **Method**

### **Context**

This study was carried out in the School of Foreign Languages in Gaziantep University in Turkey with required permission of the institution. The institution has about

1600 students. The students are supposed to be at proficiency level to meet the requirements of their departments where English is the medium of instruction. To start their education in their departments, the students have to pass exemption exam after they enrol the university. Otherwise, based on the placement test results, they are enrolled to intensive English program to improve their language skills. These students have 25-hour-education weekly in the intensive EFL programme. There are four modules in a year. The program ranges from levels A1 to B2. Besides, the students can reach level C1, if they start in B1 level and complete all the modules successfully. They take five quizzes and one exit exam in each module. Three of these quizzes includes listening, language use (vocabulary and grammar), and reading parts in accordance with the objectives given in the pacing schedule. The other two quizzes are for the students' writing skill. One of them is Portfolio Quiz, in which students are supposed to write a paragraph or an essay in concordance with the objectives of the pacing schedule. The other quiz grade is earned from the Portfolio File that includes three portfolio items. Exit exams that are administered at the end of each module contain reading comprehension, listening, writing, speaking, and language use (vocabulary and grammar). At the end of four modules, they take a final exam which assesses the overall foreign language skills of the students.

The students have speaking exams as a part of their exit exams and final exam. The students are provided with the speaking topics before the exit exams so that they improve their speaking skills in an intended and better way. The speaking topics are not given for the last exit exam and final exam. The study was conducted at the School of Foreign Languages of Gaziantep University at the end of 2017-2018 education year.

## Participants

This study included 245 students in the School of Foreign Languages in Gaziantep University in Turkey. They were mainly engineering students. There were also students of the faculty of architecture and economics. The study included only B2 level students' speaking score in their last module (module 4), and their speaking score in the previous module (module 3) because B2 level students compose the main part of total students of the school. Two hundred students were picked from B2 level randomly. The number of participants in each group is presented in Table 1:

**Table 1:** The number of the participants taking speaking tests and interviews

	Number of participants	
	Speaking test	Interview
Module 3	200	24
Module 4	200	24
Focus group	45	1

The participants were included into the study in three stages. The first stage was to gather the speaking scores of two hundred students in module 3. The second stage was to gather the speaking scores of two hundred students in module 4. The third stage was focus group discussion. There were 45 students totally. The purpose was to ask the opinions of forty five B2-level students about the implementation of providing the students with the speaking exam topics.

## Data Collection Tools

The purpose of this study is to investigate if students' familiarity with the speaking topics before the exams has an effect on their speaking scores. For that purpose, qualitative

and quantitative methods were used to gather detailed data. Interview was used twice as data collection tool to gather data for different purposes: 1) semi-structured (face-to-face) interviews, 2) focus group interview.

### **Speaking tests**

Speaking tests were in-house designed oral test to assess students' speaking skills at the school of foreign languages. The test is done with two raters who serve as raters and interlocutors independently. The test prompts and questions were gathered from the course content, which builds a content related evidence for the tool. And, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis revealed that the scores from the two raters were consistent ( $r=.82$ ).

### **Semi-structured (face-to-face) interviews with the participants**

Semi-structured (face-to-face) interview tool was used twice to gather data about the possible effect of the students' familiarity with the speaking topics before the exams. With this object, in module 3 and 4, on the exam days, the participants were supposed to go to the designated classes in allocated time. When the participant came to the class, the interviewers wanted him/her to choose two of the speaking topics randomly, but the participant was supposed to talk about only one of them. They were given five minutes to talk. The interviewers were allowed to ask follow-up questions if required. The interviewers assessed the performance of the students and the marks are given in accordance to the rubric containing five parts (task achievement, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, fluency and coherence, pronunciation). The results were used to o t-test.

### **Focus group interview**

There was a need of detailed information from the students, so two classes at the level of B2 in the School of Foreign Languages in Gaziantep University were chosen randomly. There were twenty students in one of the class and twenty five in the other class. The ideas of the students about the implementation (providing the students with the speaking topics before the exam) were asked. Their common ideas were also reported.

### **Procedures**

Firstly, the required permission was received from the institution. In module 3, the students were provided with twenty speaking exam topics which were prepared for the speaking part of the exit exam. ten days before the exit exam so that the students could have the chance to study the topics in detail. The provided topics were parallel to the speaking topics of their course book. On the exam day, the participants were divided into groups of 15 or 16 students. There were two interviewers for each group. The students were supposed to go to the designated classes in allocated time. When the students came to the class one by one, the interviewers wanted them to choose two of the pre-given topics randomly, but the students were supposed to talk about only one of them. They were given five minutes to talk. The interviewers were allowed to ask follow-up question if required. Two researchers used analytic scoring method with the help of the same speaking rubric that included five parts (task achievement, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, fluency and coherence, pronunciation). The grades of the interviewers were averaged. The averages that were on the scale of hundred were determined as the score of the students.

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In module 4, the implementation was the same with one difference. The topics were prepared in conformity with the speaking topics of their course book, but the topics were not given the students beforehand. The students were supposed to go to the designated classes in allocated time to talk about the topics. There were two interviewers. The interviewers asked the students to choose two of pre-prepared twenty topics randomly, but they were supposed to talk about only one of them. The interviewers used the same rubric that they used in module 3. They gave the grades analytically. The averages of the grades of the interviews (on the scale of hundred) were considered as the scores of the participants. The results were used to specify how students' familiarity with the speaking topics before the exams affected their speaking scores.

After the students took the exam, a focus group interview was carried out with forty-five students in two groups on different occasions (Group 1: 20 students and group 2: 25 students). Their opinions about the implementation (giving the students the speaking topics before the exam) were asked. Their comments were noted by the researcher and collected data were analyzed through content analysis.

### Data analysis

The data were collected from two hundred participants through the agency of twenty four interviewers to see the differences between the scores of the students in module 3 and 4. The data were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) in two different columns (scores of module 3 and module 4). Paired-sample t test was used to analyze the scores.

Moreover, the data were collected from forty five students in focus group. The data included the students' personal opinions about the implementation (providing the students with the speaking topics before the exam). The common ideas were written up.

## Findings

### Findings of the paired-sample t test

The data were analysed to discover if there was a significant difference between the scores of the students in two modules. The findings are given in Table 2;

**Table 2:** Paired samples t-test results

	Mean	N	Sd	t	df	p
Speaking Module4	71,98	200	14,68	-1,819	199	,07
test scores Module3	73,87	200	13,32			

As seen in the table, the speaking scores of the same 200 students in Module 3 and 4 were analyzed, and the independent samples t-test results show that participants' pre-test scores ( $M=73,87$ ;  $sd=13,32$ ) were not found statistically different from participants' post-test scores ( $M=71,98$ ;  $sd=14,68$ ;  $t(199): -1,819$ ,  $p=,07$ ). It cannot be concluded that a significant difference exists between the speaking scores of the participants in the modules for which different implementations were done. In other words, pre-given topics did not affect their speaking scores significantly. To interpret the results in detail, the opinions of the students about the implementation were also asked.

### **Findings of the interviews with focus group**

The findings of the interviews conducted with the students of two different classes that were chosen randomly are worth mentioning. The students usually found the implementation (providing the students with the speaking topics before the exam) useless. They said that the exit exam was more important than their speaking exam. It is important to mention here that speaking grades constitute 15% of their total exit exam. Moreover, they also mentioned that they did not study all the topics as it would take too much time. When they were asked how many topics they studied, they said only eight or nine out of twenty topics, and they also told that if they did not like the topic, they ignored the grade they would take.

The students were also asked about a better implementation for better oral performance for them. They said that they needed to practice during lessons more, so there should be speaking lessons. Then, they were asked if the speaking tasks of the course book were enough. They usually said that they were insufficient. In summary, the findings of the focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews were parallel to each other.

### **Discussion**

First of all, the study was conducted to find an answer to the research question “Does students’ familiarity with the speaking topics before the exams have a positive effect on students’ speaking scores?” One different application was done, and the opinions of the participants were taken. The findings concluded that there was not an important difference between the implementations. However, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the topics in two implementations were parallel to the speaking topics and tasks of the course book of the students. The results may prove that the proficiency level and readiness of the students can contribute to the development of the students’ success more than the implementation of providing the students with the topics before the exams, so it is worth mentioning that in-class training has crucial role. This may mean that the students were made ready for the speaking exam during the lessons, which can support the idea in the literature (Hare & Devine, 1983; He & Shi, 2012).

Moreover, it is also worth mentioning again the fact that the speaking exams constitute only 15% of their five out of their twenty five exams, and the fact that the students stated they placed more emphasis on the rest of the exit exam (except speaking exam section), and tended to ignore the topics they were not interested in. All of these defend the idea that there is a negative washback effect of the current speaking exam, probably as a result of low percentage of the exam. In spite of the difficulties inherent in testing speaking, a speaking test can be a source of beneficial backwash, and if speaking is tested, unless it is tested at a very low level, such as reading aloud, this encourages the teaching of speaking in classes (Kitao, & Kitao, 1996). The notion of ‘washback’ is common in the language teaching and testing literature, and tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in classrooms (Alderson, J. C., & Wall, D. (1993).

In the literature, it is mentioned that topic familiarity cannot override language proficiency in reading comprehension; that is, low-proficiency students could not catch up with high proficiency students even in familiar topics (Mahmoudi, & Mahmoudi, 2017). If we take it in terms of speaking, the findings in this study are not enough to support this idea. To illustrate, the pass mark of the school is 65. It can be said that our sample (200 students) was usually successful as the 75% of the students could get 65 points or more. Even though the number of the students is enough in respect of reliability of the study, the findings are associated with the results of B2 level students as the study does not include findings related

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to the performance of the students from other levels (A1, A2, B1, C1, and C2). Our findings give support to the idea that as students get more proficient in their second language, their reliance on background knowledge diminishes (Mahmoudi, & Mahmoudi, 2017, p.503).

### Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of the study was to investigate if there was a significant difference between two different implementations for oral assessment. The study showed us pre-given topics did not affect the results. There might be more important factors such as readiness, proficiency levels of the students, negative washback affect, in-class training.

The topics for the assessments were prepared in accordance with the speaking topics and tasks of the course book of the students. The researchers should place more emphasis on how different topics that are not parallel to in-class training of the students can affect the results. Furthermore, it is significant to mention that there was topic variety (20 topics) for 200 students for each assessment in this research, so it can be said that 10 students on average talked about the same topic. The students talked about only one topic, so it is suggested to conduct a research with the students who talk about more than one topic. The aim of this is to find out if the performances of the students change when they talk about different topics, which can affect the results.

The reliability of the study was high as there were 200 students. However, the two stage sampling was carried out. The first one is criterion sampling (Only B2 level groups were chosen). The second one is random sampling (The students from the determined groups were chosen randomly.). This may result in falsification. Moreover, with the aim of making the students show their best performance during assessment, they were allowed to talk about one of the topics that they chose, and the interviewers were allowed to ask follow-up questions when necessary. These factors might also have affected the results.

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## Appendices

### 1. B1 Speaking Exam Topics (For Module 3)

#### 1. POSSIBILITIES

- \*What would you do if you were your teacher?
- \*What would you do if you were your father / mother?
- \* What would you do if won the lottery?
- \*What would you do if you split up from your boyfriend / girlfriend?
- \* What would you do if you had the power to change the world?

#### 2. PROS AND CONS

- \* What are the pros and cons of social networking sites?
- \* What are the pros and cons of the mobile phone?
- \* What are the pros and cons of television?
- \* What are the pros and cons of computer games?

#### 3. TALKING ABOUT A FILM

- \* What was the last film you saw?
- \* What kind of film is it?
- \* What is the plot?
- \* Who are the actors and actresses?
- \* Does the film have a happy ending?
- \* Did you enjoy it? Why or why not?

#### 4. IDEAL FAMILY

- \* What are the pros and cons of all-girl or all-boy families?
- \* What is the ideal family?
- \* How many children is the ideal? Why?
- \* Are / Were there many house rules in your family?
- \*What do / did you have to do?
- \* What can be the house rules for the ideal family?

#### 5. AGREE OR DISAGREE

- \* I think girls / boys are better at making conversations.
  - \* I think girls / boys are better at learning foreign languages.
  - \* I think girls / boys are better at playing computer games.
  - \* I think girls / boys are better at talking about their feelings.
  - \* I think girls / boys are better at driving.
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## 6. LEAVING YOUR OWN COUNTRY

- \* When people go to a foreign country, they can experience culture shock.  
What do you understand by this?
- \* Why do people leave their own country?
- \* What are they looking for?
- \* What are the possible opportunities in a foreign country?

## 7. THE PEOPLE IN YOUR FAMILY

- \* How are your family members different from or similar to each other?
- \* What are they like?
- \* What do they look like?
- \* What do you like or dislike about them? Why or why not?

## 8. COMPLAINTS

- What do the generations complain about?
- Think of typical complaints for these people;
- \* Very young children
- \* teenagers
- \* parents
- \* the middle-aged
- \* old people
- How about your teachers?
- What about you?

## 9. THINGS THAT DRIVE YOU CRAZY

- What drives you crazy ? Why?
- \* in your school life
  - \* in your family life
  - \* in the dormitory or flat
  - \* when you eat out

## 10. THE USES OF INTERNET

- \* What do you use internet for?
- \* Can you imagine a life without the internet?
- \* What would happen?
- \* What are the pros and cons of the internet?

### 11. INVENTIONS

Which inventions do you think are most important? Why?

- \* telephone
- \* printing press
- \* paper
- \* PC
- \* TV
- \*any other

### 12. MOBILE PHONE

- \* Could you live if you didn't have a mobile phone?
- \* How do you use it?
- \* Do you always have it with you?
- \* Do you ever switch it off?

### 13. HAPPINESS CRITERIA

-Do you agree or disagree with these statements?

- \*Buying things makes us happy.
- \*Experiences such as holidays and living abroad make us happier.
- \*We can be happy with what we have.
- \*We can enjoy what we are doing.
- \*Socializing with friends makes us happy.
- \*Knowing more about ourselves and learning our own way to be happier is important.

### 14. YOUR OPINIONS

- \*Do you agree or disagree with these statements?
- \*Using face-to-face communication is better than online communication
- \*The best thing about the internet is chatting to friends on Facebook.
- \*Making new friends is easy using social networking sites.
- \*Shopping online is better than shopping from the supermarket.
- \*Playing online games is a waste of time.

### 15. ORDER OF IMPORTANCE

What is the order of importance of these for you?

- Good friends
- Success
- Having fun
- Earning a lot of money
- A good family
- Being healthy
- Tell it by giving reasons.

**16. FEELINGS**

When did you last have such a feeling?

- \* nervous
- \* angry
- \* upset
- \* delighted
- \* proud

**17. COMPARISON OF NOW AND BEFORE**

\*When you first started university, what were the difficulties you had to deal with?

\*Are you used to your present life here at university?

\*What are the continuing problems in your life as a student?

\*Which problems did you overcome?

**18. A JOB OFFER**

\*Imagine that you have been offered a job on the other side of the world.

\* What questions could you ask about this position?

\*Would you leave your all your family and friends to work there?

\* What are the pros and cons of working in a such a far away place?

**19. IMPORTANT THINGS FOR YOU**

-Which of the things are important to you? Tell in detail.

- \*healthy outdoor activities
- \*good manners
- \*being truthful and kind
- \*putting yourself first
- \*peace not war

**20. SPACE TOURISM**

\*Can space tourism be possible for more people in the future?

\*Is it a good idea?

\*Is it necessary for humans to be in space?

\*If you had a chance ,would you travel space? Why or why not?

**2. B2 Speaking Exam Topics (For Module 3)**

1. Do you think football is a global passion? Does it unite or divide the world? Can you give some examples?

2. Think of a time in your life when things went wrong. When was it? How did you deal with this situation?

3. What can you say about your current life — what do you find meaningful, enjoyable and important or stressful and time-wasting?

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4. If you were rich and didn't need to worry economically, how would you spend your time?
  5. How would your life be different if you weren't a university student?
  6. What kind of changes do you think will take place in your life 50 years later in  
-transport    -jobs    -communication    -the home    -food    -health    -sports
  7. What 'working conditions' do you think are most important? What does 'great working conditions' mean to you?
  8. If you had a chance, what would you invent? How would your invention affect your life? In what way would it be beneficial for humanity?
  9. Which of the things are important to you?  
- recycling rubbish        -healthy outdoor activities    -having lots to eat and drink  
- being truthful and kind    -putting yourself first        - having strong opinions about everything
  10. What is your biggest fear in life? Are you afraid that it might come true? How do you cope with your fears? What is your biggest fear for the world?
  11. What are the negative and positive effects of using the internet for children, for adults and for old people?
  12. "Laughter is the best medicine." Do you agree? Why or why not? How can laughter affect the people as social beings?
  13. Are you a good decision-maker? Talk about a time when you had to make a choice. What did you decide? How did you make your decision? Do you think it was the right one? Why or why not?
  14. The purposes of imprisonment are:  
A) to punish the criminal  
B) to protect the society from the criminal  
C) to rehabilitate the criminal.  
Do you think these aims are achieved? What other forms of punishment might be more effective?
  15. Are you a light sleeper (everything wakes you up) or a heavy sleeper (nothing wakes you up)? Do you get enough sleep in general? What happens when you don't get enough? Talk about yourself as a sleeper.
  16. Name a person who you truly admire. Describe the person and say why you admire him/her.
  17. Do you think computers help society?  
Do you think computers are bad for health?  
How do you think computers changed the world?
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18. Can you make a comparison of your childhood and your parents?

Do you think a lot of children are spoiled these days?

What household rules do you think are a good idea for families?

19. "Social networking sites have positive effects on society." Do you agree with the statement? Why or why not?

20. Describe in your life when you set a goal and didn't give up. What were you trying to do? What made it hard? How did you reach your goal, or were you disappointed?

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