

# An Action Research to Alleviate Speaking Anxiety of Prospective EFL Teachers

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## Abstract

This study was driven by the need to help freshman prospective EFL teachers control high foreign language speaking anxiety that was observed during the compulsory course of “Oral Communication Skills-I”. A 14-week action plan was designed to alleviate the foreign language anxiety (FLA) they felt while speaking and improve their speaking performance. Multiple sources of data were collected by means of quantitative and qualitative measures in order to evaluate the effect of the action plan on participants. Qualitative results demonstrated that the action plan positively affected their speaking performance, and self-confidence. Additionally, a slight decline in their speaking anxiety was revealed. On the other hand, a decline in their speaking performance was observed. Thus, despite the decline in their speaking performance, the action was useful in supporting socio-psychological factors that are significant determinants of speaking performance. The study provides some clues for re-structuring the curriculum used in faculties of education. Despite the ample research on FLA in the EFL setting, existing research has little to report on FLA experienced by non-native prospective EFL teachers and majority of this research aims to find out the sources of FLA they experienced, so the study fills in a crucial gap in the related body of literature.

**Keywords:** action research, foreign language anxiety, prospective EFL teachers, speaking skill

## İngilizce Öğretmeni Adaylarının Konuşma Kaygılarını Azaltmak İçin Tasarlanmış Bir Eylem Araştırması

### Öz

Bu çalışma, birinci sınıf İngilizce öğretmeni adaylarının “Sözlü İletişim Becerileri-I” zorunlu dersi sırasında gözlemlenen yüksek yabancı dil konuşma kaygısını kontrol etmelerine yardım etme ihtiyacından ortaya çıkmıştır. Konuşma sırasında hissettikleri yabancı dil kaygısını hafifletmek ve konuşma performanslarını artırmak için 14 haftalık bir eylem planı tasarlanmıştır. Eylem planının katılımcıların üzerindeki etkisini değerlendirmek için nicel ve nitel ölçümler yoluyla birden fazla kaynaktan veri toplanmıştır. Nitel sonuçlar, eylem planının katılımcıların konuşma performanslarını, kişilerarası becerilerini ve özgüvenlerini olumlu yönde etkilediğini göstermiştir. Ayrıca konuşma kaygılarında hafif bir düşüş olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Öte yandan konuşma performanslarında düşüş gözlemlendi. Bu nedenle, katılımcıların konuşma performanslarındaki düşüşe rağmen, eylem planının, konuşma performansının önemli belirleyicileri olan sosyo-psikolojik faktörleri desteklemede faydalı olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Çalışma, eğitim fakültelerinde kullanılan eğitim programının yeniden yapılandırılması için önemli ipuçları sunmaktadır. Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenme konusunda çok sayıda araştırmaya rağmen, mevcut araştırma, İngilizce öğretmeni adaylarının yaşadığı yabancı dil öğrenme kaygısı hakkında çok az bilgi vermektedir ve mevcut araştırmanın büyük çoğunluğu, hedef grubun yaşadığı kaygının nedenlerini bulmaya yöneliktir. Bu nedenle, çalışma alan yazındaki önemli bir boşluğu doldurmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** eylem araştırması, İngilizce öğretmeni adayları, konuşma becerisi, yabancı dil kaygısı

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## INTRODUCTION

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is one of the most frequently experienced affective factors in language classes. In speaking classes where students need to process language input and produce output simultaneously FLA is observed frequently (Çağatay, 2015). Although some learners perform successfully in learning different subjects, they might not display the same performance learning a foreign language because of mental block against it. In this case, anxiety might be the factor that impedes the learning process of these learners (Horwitz et al., 1986). FLA has a harmful effect on the speaking performance of foreign language learners. Ultimately, speaking anxiety might cause students to have difficulty in adapting to their learning environment and succeeding in learning to speak (Hanifa, 2018; Woodrow, 2006).

Regarding the types of anxiety, three of the most prominent researchers of FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986) distinguished the phenomenon from other anxiety types, and they became the first to define FLA. The researchers defined FLA as “a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process” (p. 128). They suggested that FLA is a situation-specific anxiety and results from mastering a foreign language in formal environments, so it should be viewed as a different case from general classroom anxiety that is being transferred to foreign language learning. Besides, FLA should not be viewed as a state that occurs because of transferring classroom anxiety (that includes test anxiety, communication anxiety, and anxiety resulting from negative evaluation) to foreign language setting. Results of the research by MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) supported the theory that FLA could be distinguished from general anxiety, and FLA was defined as situation-specific anxiety that occurs systematically over time. Besides, it was concluded that foreign language proficiency level and FLA are related (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Later, this result was confirmed by further studies (Sparks & Ganschow, 2007; Thompson & Lee, 2013). Results of the further studies showed that anxiety influences both language learning and communication skills negatively.

### Foreign Language Anxiety and Language Learning

Amongst students who experience FLA, anxiety is mostly associated with speaking the language. Learners find speaking publicly in the target language extremely anxiety-provoking (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). According to Horwitz (1996, p. 1), “much of this anxiety results from the inherent threat to the learner’s self-concept of competence and individuality posed by communicating in an imperfect way”. To put it another way, communication requires nonspontaneous and complex mental operations and the performance in the second language might challenge the self-concept of an individual, so it might lead to panic, self-consciousness, or fear. Additionally, the researcher states that FLA in second language learning has already been recognized and teachers and learners are now aware that some students (in particular the ones with high anxiety) feel anxious using a second language.

The research on FLA demonstrates that FLA is experienced in EFL (English as Foreign Language) settings, as well. Related body of literature presents ample evidence about the sources of FLA in EFL settings. According to the results of these studies, reasons of FLA in EFL settings are students’ past learning experiences about language learning, visiting foreign countries, academic achievement, overall average expected for the course, self-perceived academic abilities, and perceived self-worth (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999). Additionally, female gender is disadvantageous in terms of FLA (Demirdaş & Bozdoğan, 2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999; Özalp & Merç, 2022, Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014) because female students experience higher level of anxiety while speaking a foreign language. Besides, some other reasons are immediate questions teachers asked, fear of making mistakes while speaking English, negative evaluation of others, and concern to have a perfect pronunciation (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). Last, a study conducted in an EFL context gave evidence on the sources of speaking anxiety. The results revealed that the reasons of FLA in EFL setting could be classified into three categories, namely, cognitive, affective, and performance-oriented. Cognitive factors include being familiar with the topic and interlocutors while affective factors constitute self-consciousness, or feelings towards the topic discussed and group members. Finally, performance-oriented reasons are planning and rehearsals for the task, environmental conditions, and discourse control (Hanifa, 2018).

Regarding the effects of FLA on language learning, it is obvious that it has a harmful effect. Anxiety influences both language learning and communication skills negatively because students with high anxiety are unable to show the language input they are processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Highly anxious learners learn more slowly and remember less material than their counterparts with lower levels of anxiety (MacIntyre &

Gardner, 1994). Although he did not investigate the effect of FLA on language learning, Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014) stated that EFL speaking anxiety might cause lack of self-confidence and giving up speaking in a classroom atmosphere.

Concerning classroom interventions to overcome foreign language anxiety, an existing study categorized the interventions into two time periods as before and after 2000. Before 2000, the interventions to control anxiety targeted teachers. The techniques suggested were journal keeping, emotive therapies, behavioral contracts, use of pair/group activities in classrooms, relaxation activities, and presenting a non-threatening classroom environment. After 2000, interventions suggested to control anxiety included such strategies as self-encouragement to take risks, positive talk, positive thinking, and short-term project work (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021).

Likewise, Casado and Dereshiwsky (2001) offered suggestions about how to control high anxiety in foreign language classes. According to the researchers, teachers need to explain grammar structures in the native language of students particularly in beginner and elementary classes. Support groups are beneficial in providing learners with an opportunity to discuss difficulties in language learning, as well. Another interesting finding obtained by Effiong (2016) was that along with their age and tone of voice, the dress code of teachers is significant in terms of evidencing their friendliness and self-presentation. Therefore, teachers having a less formal style may alleviate anxiety in foreign language classrooms.

#### Foreign Language Anxiety Amongst Non-native Prospective Teachers

Despite the ample research on FLA in the EFL setting, existing research has little to report on “FLA experienced by non-native prospective EFL teachers” (Canessa, 2004; Horwitz, 1996; Horwitz et al., 2010). Non-native English teachers are increasing in number worldwide and although they are supposed to be high-level speakers of their target language, they are still foreign language learners and they might experience FLA, just as any other language learner might. Even non-native instructors of advanced levels of EFL might discover that language learning is never completely finished (Tüm & Kunt, 2013).

As stated by Horwitz (1996), when a teacher completes the required course of study to become a teacher, his language learning process is not complete. In addition to the demands on their linguistic skills posed by classroom teaching, these teachers immediately recognize the need to improve their target language proficiency. Likewise, teacher certification does not guarantee confidence in using the target language, which explains why speaking “in front of the class” and “on the spot” was found to be the most anxiety-provoking situation amongst non-native prospective teachers according to the results of some studies (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Young, 1990; Young, 1992). The anxiety prospective teachers feel might result in some undesirable behaviors. Initially, prospective teachers with FLA might minimize or avoid speaking the target language publicly when they start teaching in case their classes pose over-concern about correctness and native-like pronunciation. However, language teachers and instructional materials are two significant sources of input in language classes, so a teacher that avoids speaking decreases the amount of exposure to the target language. Furthermore, students in the language class might perceive the teacher’s uneasiness, so they might experience the same feeling. Last, the teacher might develop negative feelings towards the profession such as dissatisfaction and burnout (Horwitz, 1996).

Türkiye is one of the expanding circle countries where English language is taught as a foreign language (Crystal, 2012), so English language teachers are non-native teachers that teach English in an expanding circle country and they are very likely to experience FLA (Dağtan & Cabaroğlu, 2021; Tüm & Kunt, 2013; Tüm, 2012). There is a scarce body of literature that explored the FLA prospective EFL teachers in Türkiye experienced and most of the related research aimed to investigate reasons for FLA. In one of these studies, causes of FLA experienced by prospective teachers in the ELT department at a Turkish university (Dağtan & Cabaroğlu, 2021) were parallel to the ones in EFL settings. According to the results of this study, fear of being despised, personality traits, and teachers’ improper strategies were three factors that provoked anxiety amongst the participants. Likewise, the results of another study demonstrated that non-native prospective teachers at a Turkish university felt anxious when they were not well planned, encountered an unexpected situation, and they thought they were not proficient enough to accomplish a speaking task (Merç, 2015). Last, an existing study by Subaşı (2010) revealed that FLA of prospective EFL teachers stemmed from their personality traits, teachers’ manners, teaching procedures, and previous language learning experience.

Additionally, the effect of FLA on Turkish prospective EFL teachers’ language learning was investigated by few researchers. In a study, it was found that FLA had an adverse effect on two language areas that were the application of grammar rules and the execution of speaking skills (Tüm & Kunt, 2013). Last, regarding the strategies to cope with FLA, it was suggested by Tüm (2012) to present a non-threatening environment where FLA

was accepted as part of language learning, so it was useful for teacher trainers to familiarize with guidelines that would help prospective teachers that experienced high FLA (set realistic self-expectations for proficiency, deep-breathing, and progressive relaxation exercises and so on.).

This present study attempts to address two gaps on foreign language anxiety experienced by prospective EFL teachers. Initially, the majority of the existing studies aimed to find out sources of FLA the target group experienced. In these studies, quantitative (scale studies) (Tüm & Kunt, 2013; Tüm, 2012) or mix-method research designs (Merç, 2015) were adopted in order to reveal causes and effects of FLA on language learning of prospective EFL teachers. Although some strategies were suggested to cope with FLA (Horwitz, 1996; Tüm, 2012), there is a need for studies that examine the impact of certain strategies or actions on alleviating it. This study reports on the effect of an action plan designed to alleviate speaking anxiety of prospective EFL teachers in addition to revealing sources of FLA, so it addresses a significant gap in the related body of literature.

Second, as stated earlier, despite the ample research on FLA experienced by EFL students, there is a scarce body of literature that reports on “FLA experienced by non-native prospective teachers” (Horwitz, 1996; Horwitz et al., 2010; Canessa, 2004), so there is a need for further research to confirm results of the existing studies. This present study aims to reach conclusions about the FLA amongst prospective EFL teachers. ELT departments in faculties of education in Türkiye are aimed at non-native prospective teachers and include a wide range of courses on language teaching methodology, linguistics, second language acquisition, education, as well as a number of courses to improve language proficiency of students. In particular, the courses offered during the first academic year are mostly aimed at developing language proficiency of students in four main skills, reading, writing, speaking and listening (Tüm, 2012). “Oral communication skills” course is one of the compulsory courses offered during the first and second terms to promote students’ verbal and non-verbal oral communication skills in a variety of settings in interpersonal, group and public speaking contexts. Considering the results of the studies that demonstrated that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking situation amongst the non-native prospective teachers (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Young, 1990; Young, 1992), prospective teachers are more likely to experience FLA in “Oral communication skills” course compared to other courses. However, most of the research, especially in the Turkish setting was conducted with senior prospective EFL students (Dağtan & Cabaroğlu, 2021; Merç, 2015; Subaşı, 2010; Tüm & Kunt, 2013). Therefore, this present study is significant in terms of revealing the FLA freshman prospective EFL teachers experience in a communication-based course.

### **Research Questions**

This study was driven by the need to help freshman prospective EFL teachers control high foreign language speaking anxiety that was observed during the compulsory course of “Oral Communication Skills-I”. During the course, one of the researchers observed the reluctance of prospective EFL teachers to speak English in the classroom, which led the two researchers to design an action research study in order to alleviate FLA they felt while speaking and improve their speaking performance. The action research sought answers to the four questions presented below:

1. What are the reasons for prospective EFL teachers’ reluctance in the oral communication skills course?
2. Does the action alleviate foreign language speaking anxiety of prospective EFL teachers?
3. Does the action have a positive effect on the speaking performance of prospective EFL teachers?
4. What are the opinions of prospective EFL teachers about the action?

### **METHOD**

This study is designed as action research to address the need for reducing FLA prospective EFL teachers feel while speaking and improving their oral proficiency. As Corey (1954) states, action research gives “a priori promise of enabling us to cope more effectively with our professional problems” (p. 376). Furthermore, since it provides professional growth opportunities and facilitates teacher empowerment, action research practices are seen as integral to teacher education programs (Hine, 2013). The research falls into the type of “practical action research” in which educators carry out a small-scale research project focusing on a specific problem to be resolved within a school environment. Practical action research is used in situations in which teacher researchers “seek to enhance the practice of education through the systematic study of a local problem” (Creswell, 2005, p. 611). It usually involves a small-case research project, narrowly directs at a specific problem or issue and is undertaken by individual teachers or teams within a particular education setting (Jonida, 2014).

In this study, action research design was seen as necessary in the context of an English language teacher education program where prospective EFL teachers were observed to be reluctant to speak in front of the classroom during the compulsory course of “Oral Communication Skills-I” offered in fall term, 2021-2022 academic year.

### Context and Participants

During the fall term, 2021-2022 academic year, the first researcher was delivering the compulsory course of “Oral Communication Skills-I” in the department of English Language Teaching (ELT) at a Turkish university and she observed that few students were eager enough to express themselves during the lessons. While some students struggled to speak the target language in response to the immediate questions of the trainer, some of them even refused to speak. After the identification of the problem, she cooperated with the second researcher who was teaching at another state university and had a PhD. degree in ELT. The two researchers of the study cooperated in order to find out solutions to the problem observed. They made an action plan and applied it during the compulsory course of “Oral Communication Skills-II” that was offered in the spring semester of 2021-2022 academic year.

Participants of the study are prospective EFL teachers in the department of ELT at a state university in Türkiye. 35 participants filled in the foreign language anxiety scale and 62 participants performed video-recorded tasks. 10 participants answered pre-action questions, 35 participants gave written responses to post-action questions, and post-task questions were answered by 31 participants. Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting the participants of the study. It is mainly used for focusing on characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best enable the researchers to answer the research questions. The sample being studied is not representative of the population, so it is commonly used in qualitative research. In this type of sampling, researchers may have a specific group in mind (Etikan et al., 2016). In our case, the prospective students that took the preliminary course (Oral Communication Skills-I) were invited to the study. For pre-action questions, the prospective teachers that the instructor observed to have a high anxiety during the preliminary course were invited and 10 students volunteered to answer the questions. Regarding other measurements, all prospective teachers that took the preliminary course were invited, and the data was obtained from the voluntary ones. The age of the students changed between 17-32 and while 36 students were female 26 students were male.

### Research Instruments

Multiple sources of data were collected by means of quantitative and qualitative measures in order to evaluate the effect of the action plan on participants. The research instruments are as follows:

**Foreign language speaking anxiety scale:** Horwitz et al. (1986) developed a scale to measure the FLA levels of language learners and this scale has become the most widely used scale with some adaptations for measuring speaking anxiety by the scholars in the field (Bozok, 2018; Çağatay, 2015; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). In the original form, Horwitz et al. (1986) grouped the items on the scale into three categories: "communication apprehension", "test anxiety" and "fear of negative evaluation". In this study, the version adapted by Saltan (2003) was used for several reasons. First, Saltan (2003) adapted the scale specifically for measuring FLA that arouses while speaking the target language. She designed the questionnaire by selecting 18 items which were decided to be directly related to foreign language speaking anxiety from 33 items of original form. The Cronbach's Alpha for these items was found as .93, suggesting very good internal consistency reliability for the scale. The questionnaire is a 5-graded Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) As the researchers aimed to identify and alleviate the FLA prospective EFL teachers felt in a communication-based course, they preferred this version.

**Pre-action interview questions:** The questions aimed to explore sources of speaking anxiety the participants experienced during the compulsory course of “Oral Communication Skills I”. Two questions were asked to explore how the participants felt while speaking English and why they felt so.

**Speaking Tasks:** Learners in groups of four or six were required to perform and video-record four speaking tasks throughout the semester. The tasks were chosen from an advanced-level course book, Language Leader (Cotton et al., 2010) which was used in the compulsory course of Oral Communication Skills-II in the teacher education program. Video-recorded task performances were evaluated and graded by the researchers based on oral proficiency evaluation criteria. The tasks are illustrated in Table 1.



**Table 1.** Speaking Tasks

Order	Name of the task	Content
1	Choosing an intern	First participants had to choose an intern for an internship at UNESCO in 10-15 minutes. They were expected to discuss the strong and weak points of three profiles in the course book by using the phrases for “talking about strengths and weaknesses” given on page 13.
2	Choosing and planning a publicity campaign	Three participants represented the government health department while each of the other three participants made a presentation about a publicity campaign for a different health issue. Government representatives had to listen to presentations and reach a decision about which campaign to choose by using the phrases for “inviting someone to speak, responding to argument, and making a choice” on page 45 in 10-15 minutes.
3	Retail revamp	Participants had to decide how to save a company on the verge of bankruptcy by using the phrases for “making a proposal and disagreeing” on page 55 in 10-15 minutes.
4	Auditioning	Groups were divided into two as reality show producers and contestant candidates. Candidates had to create a new character and persuade producers to be chosen by giving impressive answers to the questions in the course book. Participants were expected to use the phrases for “recalling what someone said, explaining choices and making a decision” on page 109 in 10-15 minutes.

**Post-task questions:** The questions aimed to encourage the participants to assess their own performance and get their reaction to the task. Self-assessment was expected to help them improve their performances while recording the following tasks. Two questions were asked. First, they were asked to explain the strengths of their task. Second, they were asked to explain the weaknesses of the task.

**Post-action questions:** The questions aimed to gather qualitative data to measure the effect of action on speaking skills of the participants and get suggestions on how to improve the tasks used in the action plan. In the first question, they were asked to comment on the effects of the tasks on their speaking skill. In the second question, they were requested to make suggestions on how to improve the tasks given.

**Evaluation Criteria:** The video-records were evaluated by the two researchers according to oral proficiency evaluation criteria which were based on task achievement, grammatical competence, language use, and fluency. A participant can get a minimum of 0 and maximum 25 from each criterion. The use of criteria to evaluate oral performance of students is significant in terms of providing consistency while evaluating the speaking performance. Dunbar et al. (2006) suggests that speaking competence consists of some sub-areas that are choosing a topic and organizing the speech appropriately, language use, vocal variety, correct articulation, grammar, pronunciation, using supportive materials, and using appropriate nonverbal behaviors. The evaluation criteria used in this study is in line with these sub areas. First, task achievement includes the criteria about choosing a topic and organizing the speech appropriately, using supportive materials, and using appropriate nonverbal behaviors. Second, grammatical and lexical competence consists of criteria about language use. Last, fluency consists of criteria about vocal variety, correct articulation, and pronunciation. Besides, in the evaluation criteria, an analytic approach is adopted because the instrument works on each criterion separately, providing scales for a list of components and a description for each rating. This type of rubric is used to assess important tasks where each component needs to be evaluated separately (Ülker, 2017).

#### **Data Collection**

Basically, action research follows a spiral process which includes problem investigation, taking action and fact-finding about the result of action. It enables a teacher to adopt and craft the most appropriate strategy within its own teaching environment (Jonida, 2014). After identifying the unwillingness of the prospective EFL teachers

towards speaking during the compulsory course of “Oral Communication Skills-I” the two researchers cooperated to find solutions via practical action research. The research was conducted following three phases (Table 2). During the problem investigation phase, the course’s instructor, the first researcher of the study, conducted interviews with randomly selected and volunteer participants in order to find out sources of speaking anxiety. 10 participants answered the questions. After that, 35 participants in total completed the Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (Saltan, 2003) as pre-test. While interview questions aimed to explore the sources of FLA the participants felt while speaking, their level of FLA was measured via the scale.

During the second phase that is taking action, the two researchers designed speaking tasks in line with the results of the pre-action interviews and the scale. Results of the interviews led the researchers to design tasks that allow the students to speak outside the classroom and choose their own group members. Accordingly, 4 tasks were assigned to the students during spring semester, 2021-2022 academic year. Before each task, target vocabulary and grammar structures were practiced in the classroom and in the following week the participants were required to video-record their tasks outside the classroom. The video-records were evaluated by the researchers according to oral proficiency evaluation criteria. Researchers’ feedback was shared with the students after watching sample videos in the classroom and the participants were allowed to make comments about the tasks they watched in the classroom. Furthermore, they answered post-task questions to reflect on strengths and weaknesses of their task. The same procedure was repeated for the four tasks assigned.

During the post-action phase that is fact finding, “Foreign language speaking anxiety scale” (Saltan, 2003) was applied as the post-test, and the students were requested to answer two post-action questions. The scores of the participants in pre-test and post-test were compared to evaluate the effect of the action on alleviating FLA the participants felt while speaking. Additionally, the effect of the action was evaluated via qualitative data obtained from post-action questions. Last, the results of the action plan were reported and some suggestions on how to improve the tasks for next term were made.

**Table 2.** Action Plan

Problem investigation Pre-action (Week 1)	Conducting foreign language anxiety scale (pre-test) Pre-action questions
	Week 2: Preparation for task 1 (Target vocabulary and grammatical structures were practiced during the lesson) Week 3: Task 1 (Students video-record task 1 and share it with the researchers). Video-records were evaluated by the researchers. Week 4: Watching sample video-records and the researchers’ giving feedback to students. Post-task questions (to let students reflect on their own performance along with their strengths and weaknesses)
	Week 5: Preparation for task 2 (Target vocabulary and grammatical structures were practiced during the lesson) Week 6: Task 2 (Students video-record task 2 and share it with the researchers). Video-records were evaluated by the researchers. Week 7: Watching sample video-records and the researchers’ giving feedback to students. Post-task questions (to let students reflect on their own performance along with their strengths and weaknesses)
Taking action	Week 8: Preparation for task 3 (Target vocabulary and grammatical structures were practiced during the lesson) Week 9: Task 3 (Students video-record task 3 and share it with the researchers). Video-records were evaluated by the researchers.
During action (Week 2-Week 13)	Week 10: Watching sample video-records and the researchers’ giving feedback to students. Post-task questions (to let students reflect on their own performance along with their strengths and weaknesses)
	Week 11: Preparation for task 4 (Target vocabulary and grammatical structures were practiced during the lesson) Week 12: Task 4 (Students video-record task 4 and share it with the researchers). Video-records were evaluated by the researchers. Week 13: Watching sample video-records and the researchers’ giving feedback to students. Post-task questions (to let students reflect on their own performance along with their strengths and weaknesses)
Finding fact Post- action (Week 14)	Conducting foreign language anxiety scale (post-test) Post-action questions

### Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques were used. While the results of “Foreign language speaking anxiety scale” (Saltan, 2003) and the grades participants received in four tasks were analyzed quantitatively, answers students gave to pre-action questions, post-task questions and post-action questions were analyzed qualitatively.

Regarding the results of “Foreign language speaking anxiety scale” (Saltan, 2003), paired samples t-test was administered to determine if the mean difference between pre-test and post-test were statistically significant. Before conducting the paired samples t-test, normality distribution of the data was measured.

First scale: Skewness is 0.19 and Kurtosis is 1.14.

Second scale: Skewness is 0.05 and Kurtosis is 0.98.

As all values of Skewness and Kurtosis were found between -1.50 and +1.50, the data was understood to display normal distribution (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Speaking performance of the participants was evaluated according to grades they received in four tasks. Speaking performances were evaluated based on four criteria (task achievement, grammatical competence, lexical competence and fluency). For each criterion, participants could get maximally 25 points. Participants were graded four times and to compare mean grades across four task performances, repeated measures ANOVA was used. Prior to the repeated measures ANOVA, normality distribution of the data was measured. Skewness and Kurtosis values were found as follows:

Task 1= Skewness is -0.26 and Kurtosis is -0.57.

Task 2= Skewness is -0.01 and Kurtosis is -1.24

Task 3= Skewness is 0.57 and Kurtosis is -0.57

Task 4= Skewness is 0.72 and Kurtosis: 0-.56.

As all values of Skewness and Kurtosis were found between -1.50 and +1.50, the data was understood to display normal distribution (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Answers given to pre-action questions, post-task questions and post-action questions were analyzed inductively (Creswell, 2005). Inductive approach was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the interviews and generate the categories. After the collection of data, the audio records were transcribed verbatim. In the coding stage, the researcher followed 5 steps suggested by Creswell (2014):

1. initial reading of the transcribed texts,
2. identifying specific text segments,
3. labeling the text segments to create categories,
4. reducing overlap and redundancy among the categories,
5. creating a model incorporating the most important categories.

Initially, the data was thoroughly read to obtain a general sense. Subsequently, descriptions or sub-themes and categories were determined in the second and third stages. In this stage no pre-set codes were used, and categories and subcategories emerged from the data at hand. After that, the overlap and redundancy among the categories were reduced. Initially, both researchers analyzed the data separately, then they compared the coding. In case of any disagreements, transcriptions were re-visited, and conflicts were resolved.

## FINDINGS

Results of the present study were reported in accordance with the research questions. The first research question is: “What are the reasons for prospective EFL teachers’ reluctance in the oral communication skills course?”. Results of the pre-action questions showed that they experienced negative feelings while speaking English, which could be the reason for their reluctance during the lessons. 8 out of 10 participants who answered pre-action questions expressed negative feelings about speaking English. They felt “anxious”, “tense” and “fearful of making mistakes”. Participants’ negative feelings emerged when they had to speak with or in front of people to whom they were unfamiliar or when they were surrounded with people whom they thought as more proficient. They attributed their negative feelings to lack of speaking practice at high school and perfectionist attitudes of parents. Thus, the students’ negative feelings about speaking in class particularly guided the researchers to design tasks that prospective teachers would perform outside the classroom, and they would choose their own group



members. Additionally, they would record the tasks as many times as they desired, and they would find the opportunity of practice.

SC: *“I feel nervous while speaking English.....I don’t do it so often. It is just like the fear when people feel when they have to do something new or something they have never done before. In fact, I don’t have difficulty speaking Turkish in front of the whole class. I can speak, no problem. However, when it is English, maybe because of lack of practice. I don’t speak English. I think that I can’t speak it. During high school, our main focus was on answering the questions in multiple-choice tests. We never spoke or wrote, so I am having difficulty in speaking and writing”.*

ZK: *“I feel nervous, maybe, because of lack of practice. Besides, I am trying to be careful about grammar and vocab. I am aware I should give up monitoring, but it is not possible. For example, sometimes, while speaking I cannot remember a word, so I stay there. I cannot keep speaking. I feel nervous and get irritated when it happens.”*

MD: *“It depends on the people around me. When I am in the classroom, I feel nervous. For example, during the midterm-exam, I was in front of the classroom, and I felt so nervous that I could not speak. I can feel better when I am comfortable with the people around me.”*

TD: *“I feel nervous; I am afraid of making mistakes. Sometimes, I notice the mistakes I make while speaking. It is not that bad to make mistakes, but I am trying to be the best. I think it is because of my parents. My father is a teacher, too. He always assisted me with my homework, and I was always the best starting from primary school. In high school, I was the best, again. I was the best in the language class, as well, so I feel sad when I make mistakes. I know it is okay to make mistakes, but ....”*

The two participants who felt more confident about speaking English expressed their joy of language learning by focusing on the British accent to improve their pronunciation, playing games and watching movies. While one of these participants stated that he got help from his teachers to correct his pronunciation mistakes, the other participant underlined the positive impact of his parents, both of whom were English teachers. These two participants can be said to have benefitted from the good role modeling of nonnative English-speaking adults when they were younger.

AD: *“I feel confident about speaking English because I can express myself better. For a long time, I thought that my English level was low because my pronunciation was bad. For example, the British accent seemed magical to me, and I thought I was bad at English. Now, I think I am good at pronunciation and spelling, and I can get the message across easily.”*

Regarding the second research question, “Does the action alleviate foreign language speaking anxiety of prospective EFL teachers?”, “Foreign language speaking anxiety scale (Saltan, 2003)” was carried out twice as pre- and post-tests so as to observe the participants’ levels of anxiety before and after the action. T-test results indicated that their anxiety levels before and after the action did not display a statistically significant difference. A slight decrease in their mean scores of anxiety levels can be seen in the table below (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Change in Anxiety Level of Students

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	SCALE1	2.7934	.91491	.15465
	SCALE2	2.6809	.96857	.16372

As illustrated in Table 3, while the mean score of the participants’ level of anxiety was 2.79 before the action, it was found to be 2.68 after the action. In other words, speaking tasks might have helped in lowering the participants’ level of anxiety to some degree. They had moderate levels of FLA before and after the action, though.

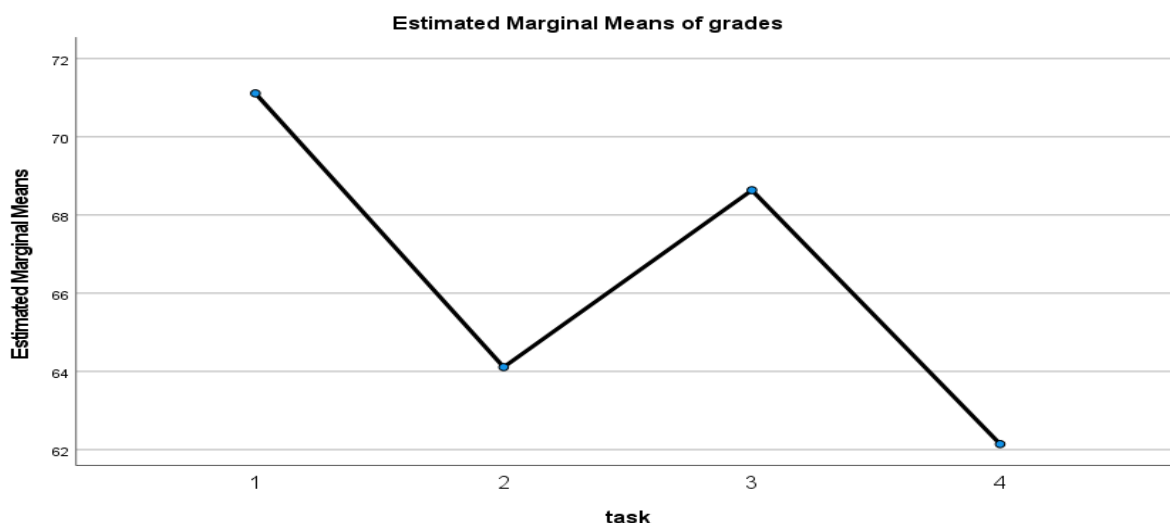
The third research question of the study is “Does the action have a positive effect on the speaking performance of prospective EFL teachers?”. In order to answer this question, differences between four task grades and answers to post-task questions were examined. First, differences among grades given for four tasks were examined by means of ANOVA test for repeated measures. ANOVA test results indicated that the differences among task grades were significant because Mauchly's Test of Sphericity value was <.001. Additionally, tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts gave evidence that mean differences across four tasks were significant (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts

Source	task	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
task	Level 1 - Level 2	3087.000	1	3087.000	5.676	.020	.084
	Level 2 - Level 3	1289.286	1	1289.286	4.400	.040	.066
	Level 3 - Level 4	2655.254	1	2655.254	16.140	<.001	.207
Error (task)	Level 1 - Level 2	33720.000	62	543.871			
	Level 2 - Level 3	18167.714	62	293.028			
	Level 3 - Level 4	10199.746	62	164.512			

As seen in Table 5, performances of participants in four speaking tasks showed a zigzag progress. While the participants received higher grades in the first and third tasks (71 and 68), they got lower grades in second and fourth tasks (64 and 62).

**Table 5.** Progress in Speaking Tasks



This reverse effect was not expected by both researchers. To examine the reasons for this decline in the participants’ performances, their answers to post-task questions were examined. In terms of strengths and weaknesses of tasks, five categories emerged from the participants’ responses (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Results of Post-Task Questions (Strengths & Weaknesses of Performances in View of the Participants)

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Group-related points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good coordination</li> <li>- Communication</li> <li>- Work distribution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unfair work distribution</li> <li>- Incoordination</li> </ul>
Language related points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Generating complex sentences</li> <li>- Good pronunciation</li> <li>- Fluency</li> <li>- Spontaneous speech when necessary</li> <li>- Being able to debate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Problems about pronunciation and fluency</li> <li>- Limited lexical range</li> <li>- Limited grammatical range</li> <li>- Reading out lines</li> </ul>
Task-related points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conforming to task instructions</li> <li>- Sufficient planning and preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Insufficient planning and preparation</li> <li>-speaking spontaneously instead of preparing a script</li> <li>-lack of rehearsal and memorization of lines</li> <li>-video-recording tasks at one go</li> <li>-keeping discussion section short</li> <li>-forgetting to introduce oneself</li> <li>-making short videos</li> <li>- Inattention to task instructions</li> <li>- Lack of creativity</li> </ul>

Technical points	High acoustic quality of videos	- Low acoustic quality of videos -Videorecording in a noisy / inappropriate environment -Lack of equipment (i.e.: microphone and internet connection)
Psychological points	-	High anxiety

As illustrated in Table 6, group-related, task-related, language-related as well as psychological and technical problems contributed to the decline in performances of the participants. Participants expressed a higher number of weaknesses compared to strengths. Both weaknesses and strengths consisted of group-related, language-related, task-related and technical points. Some quotes are as follows:

*“While preparing the task, we could improvise to assist a group member who had difficulty in expressing something, we corrected deficiencies of one another”* (Task 1, strengths, group related, good coordination).

*“We should have started to prepare the task earlier, so we could have planned the task better and practiced more”* (Task 2, weaknesses, task-related points, insufficient planning and practice).

*“We could speak fluently while recording the task. Although we did not spend a long time preparing for the task, our performance looked natural and fluent”* (Task 1, strengths, language related points).

*“We displayed a good performance during the task. We made a great effort. We spoke fluently in a natural way and we felt like we were in a real meeting and discussed simultaneously. We tried to use complex sentences. We followed the instructions well. Besides, we recorded the video a few times and edited some parts”* (Task 4, strengths, task-related points, language related points, generating complex sentences, good pronunciation, fluency, spontaneous speech when necessary, conforming to task, instructions, sufficient planning and preparation).

*“I think we did not take the task seriously. If we had taken it more seriously and planned it well, we would have displayed a better performance”* (Task 3, weaknesses, task-related points, insufficient planning and practice)

The fourth research question is “What are the opinions of prospective EFL teachers about the action?” and answers to the post-action questions were analyzed in order to answer this question. As for the post-action questions, 35 participants submitted their answers in written form. To the question of “How did the tasks affect your speaking skill?” 34 participants gave positive responses. Almost all the participants thought that the tasks improved their speaking skill. Furthermore, they stated that the tasks increased their confidence, improved their fluency, pronunciation and lexicon, lowered their stress and anxiety and helped them get accustomed to group work.

SH: *“The tasks definitely had a good effect on my speaking English because it increased my courage to speak in a friendly environment. It helped me to notice and correct the mistakes I made while pronouncing a word.”*

FD: *“In my opinion, the tasks improved my speaking skills. The fact that we could choose the group members both reduced my stress and created a fun environment while doing the homework. I enjoyed the tasks.”*

TD: *“Thanks to the tasks, I got used to group assignments. Since our first year was online, we mostly did homework on our own, and group assignments weren't very helpful. However, thanks to these tasks, I became familiar with group assignments and the homework preparation process, and I can't say that I do not feel as nervous as I used to be.”*

BU: *“Tasks affected my speaking skills in a positive way. I realized that I could have difficulty in producing sentences in some situations while I could speak fluently in some other situations. Apart from that, the variety of tasks and the conversations in new situations definitely improved my speaking competence.”*

SU: *“The tasks mostly affected our speaking performance positively because we practiced speaking with our classmates on some themes. We got informed about the topic of the task and we learned which words and which patterns are used in speaking English. Even if we sometimes forgot a word because of feeling stressed or nervous, we learned how to keep speaking in such situations. I think that I can express myself more easily now, and I feel like I can overcome the speaking anxiety.”*

Contrary to the positive comments, only one student commented negatively about the tasks:

CA: *“I think that the tasks did not have a positive effect on my speaking skill. On the contrary, maybe because it was 'homework' and I was aware my speech would be evaluated, I got excited while recording the video,*

*so I couldn't speak well. While I could speak fluently and comfortably with tourists outside of school, I could not speak very well during the tasks."*

In conclusion, despite the decline in task performance, the action appears to have a positive effect on the participants' speaking skills, self-confidence and interpersonal skills according to the results driven from the qualitative data.

To the second post-action question of "What are your suggestions about improving the tasks given?", the participants' first and foremost response was about selecting more "current", "daily", "simple", "creative", "interesting" and "enjoyable" topics. Moreover, the participants suggested choosing their own topics, and they expressed their preference for acting out in the classroom environment instead of video-recorded performances. Lastly, they suggested reducing the number of group members and changing/ not changing them in each task.

CG: *"Changing the number of group members for each task caused some problems. We had difficulty in finding a new member for a task or removing a member for the next one"*

SB: *"We could talk about different topics, maybe daily topics or more interesting ones. Maybe we could be more comfortable that way. Or it could be a task (interview, etc.) about people (tourists) from outside the school."*

FR: *"The tasks could have been a little more creative because we always either chose someone or we were chosen."*

GU *"I think that it would be more appropriate and efficient to perform the tasks in a live classroom environment rather than in the form of a video. I think it would be good to improvise instead of paper or memorizing, and rather improve it in a way that our own ideas are prioritized and practiced."*

## DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to evaluate the influence of an action plan on speaking performance of prospective EFL teachers. After identifying the high FLA they experienced during the Oral Communication Skills-I, the action plan aimed to alleviate it. The study was conducted during the second semester of 2021-2022 academic year at a state university in Türkiye.

Although prospective EFL teachers are trained to teach English during their pre-service training, they might feel anxious speaking English. A nationwide recent study proved that Turkish prospective EFL teachers are unable to speak English as proficient as expected and they have difficulty maintaining confidence while speaking (Dağtan & Cabaroğlu, 2021). Results of the present study confirmed this finding because while the participants displayed moderate level of FLA both before and after the action, the answers of the pre-action questions demonstrated that they experienced negative feelings such as fear and nervousness while speaking English and these negative feelings prevented them from maintaining confidence while speaking. Furthermore, 8 out of 10 participants expressing that they were not good at speaking support the findings of the prior study by Dağtan and Cabaroğlu (2021).

According to results of the present study, prospective EFL teachers displayed moderate level of FLA while speaking English. In another study done in Indonesian context, similar results were found out about the FLA level of prospective EFL teachers (Daud, et al., 2019). Both India and Türkiye are amongst the expanding circle countries where English is taught as a foreign language and language learners learn the target language in similar learning settings. In these learning settings, language learners do not find enough opportunity to practice the target language outside the classroom (Crystal, 2012). This fact might explain why the FLA level of Turkish and Indian prospective EFL teachers is similar.

On the other hand, some previous studies exploring the speaking anxiety of prospective EFL teachers reached contradictory results. According to some of these studies, prospective EFL teachers were found to have high-level foreign language speaking anxiety. Highly proficient prospective EFL teachers were less likely to experience high anxiety, though (Abrar et al., 2016; Hammad & Ghali, 2015). Horwitz (1996) and Tüm and Kunt (2013) presented some explanation regarding this finding. According to them, although they are supposed to be high-level speakers of their target language, prospective EFL teachers are still foreign language learners and they might experience FLA, just as any other language learner might. The contradictory results between the present study and the two prior studies (Abrar et al., 2016; Hammad & Ghali, 2015) might stem from the difference in year level of the participants. In the present study, the participant group was homogenous, and they were freshmen. However, in the prior studies, the participants were in their second year (Abrar et al., 2016) or the participants'

year level were heterogeneous including students from four different year levels (Hammad & Ghali, 2015), so the prospective teachers might be feeling more anxious as they were required to present lesson plans during the courses like a real teacher. Because results of a number of studies found out that speaking “in front of the class” and “on the spot” was found to be the most anxiety-provoking situation amongst non-native prospective teachers (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Young, 1990; Young, 1992).

Regarding the sources of anxiety, the participants of the present study stated that negative feelings emerged when they had to speak with or in front of people to whom they were unfamiliar or when they were surrounded with people whom they supposed to be more proficient. They attributed their negative feelings to lack of speaking practice at high school and perfectionist attitudes of parents. These results implied the place of social factors in improving speaking performance of the prospective EFL teachers. In a similar way, results of some previous studies (Daud et al., 2019; Hammad & Ghali, 2015; Kenoh, 2021) confirmed the significance of social factors in speaking performance of prospective EFL teachers. For example, findings reached in some studies (Daud et al., 2019; Hammad & Ghali, 2015; Kenoh, 2021) were parallel to the results of the present study. The participants in these studies stated that social factors aroused feelings of anxiety while speaking English. When they were surrounded by people, prospective teachers felt FLA because they were afraid of making mistakes and losing face and they felt nervous and under pressure dealing with people. Thus, the results of the present study imply that in case the social factors are taken into consideration while structuring teacher training programs as well as speaking courses, it is highly possible that the speaking performance of the prospective teachers will be improved. Improving the speaking performance of the prospective EFL teachers is important to avoid some undesirable outcomes. According to Horwitz (1996), the anxiety prospective teachers feel might cause them to minimize or avoid speaking the target language publicly when they start teaching. However, language teachers and instructional materials are two significant sources of input in language classes, so a teacher that avoids speaking decreases the amount of exposure to the target language.

Another significant result of the present study is that the action did not positively influence speaking performances of prospective EFL teachers. Regarding the decline observed in the speaking performances of the student teachers, it might be a result of their overconcentration on grades as products, not on the process of performing well in the tasks. Because according to the qualitative data obtained from post-task questions, although they were aware of their weaknesses they did not spend much effort to compensate for them. Because, the participants stated many weaknesses about their performances. Insufficient planning and preparation for the tasks were frequently expressed. According to the results, their planning was insufficient in terms of rehearsal and memorization of lines, keeping discussion sections long enough, introducing oneself, making videos long enough to discuss, attention to task instructions and creativity. In the post-task comments, the participants expressed a higher number of weaknesses compared to strengths, which means that although they were aware of weaknesses of their performances, they might not have made much effort to improve them. While they needed a long time to solve language-related and psychological problems, they could have solved task-related, group-related and technical problems in the last two or three tasks. The decline in the performance showed that the participants may not have behaved as meticulously as expected while practicing or video-recording the tasks and they cared more about getting grades high enough to pass the course rather than performing well.

Moreover, the zigzagging progress they displayed across the four tasks supported this claim. The participants were assigned two tasks for the midterm exam. It seemed that after they got a high point from the first task, they did not find it necessary to get a high point from the second task, so they did not try to display a good performance while practicing it. Similarly, they completed two tasks (task 3 and task 4) for the final exam. It seemed after they got a high point from the third task, they did not find it necessary to get a high point from the fourth task, so they did not make an effort to display a good performance while practicing it. Additionally, after they made sure that they would not fail the course, they might not have devoted considerable effort to improve their performance in the last task (task 4) because their mean scores indicated that they got the lowest grade in the task 4. The timing of the task could have had a negative effect on the performances of participants because the task was assigned to them later in the spring semester.

As another possibility, the decline in the speaking performance of the participants may be due to the restricted number of the tasks assigned since mastering the speaking skill requires learners to practice a lot. Speaking in a foreign language is challenging for EFL learners because it involves simultaneous activation of several mental processes that are cognitive, physical and socio-cultural. Speaking skill is both dynamic and complex (Lestari, 2019). The participants' answers to the pre-action questions revealed their lack of speaking practice at high school. This finding was supported by some past studies that investigated the washback effect of



University Entrance Exam on English language learning of prospective EFL teachers (Hatipoğlu, 2016; Sevimli, 2007; Yıldırım, 2010). In these studies, it was reported that instead of developing teaching and testing materials and methods that would foster the development of the communicative skills of the students, teachers focused on preparing their students for the exam. Furthermore, instructional language in classes was predominantly Turkish. Lack of interaction or limited use of target language influences speaking skill of EFL learners negatively (Lestari, 2019). Therefore, like the learners in the study by Bohari (2020) Turkish prospective EFL teachers should realize that they need to practice in order to overcome negative feelings such as shyness or anxiety. Considering the statements of the participants in pre-action questions and results of the past studies (Hatipoğlu, 2016; Sevimli, 2007; Yıldırım, 2010), the participants might have been given little chance of practicing the target language and their exposure to the target language might have been limited as the instructional language was predominantly Turkish at high school. This finding provides an important clue for faculties of education. Freshman prospective teachers at faculties of education are expected to be high-level speakers of English; however, most of the students in language classes in high schools are not provided with much opportunity to practice the target language, so they have weak communicative skills when they start to study ELT in faculties of education. Thus, extra courses should be enhanced to the teacher training programs used at faculties of education to allow prospective EFL teachers to use English for communicative purposes. Moreover, they should be encouraged by the instructors to join speaking clubs or international exchange programs.

Despite the decline in speaking performance of the participants across the four tasks, they reported positive effects of the action on their speaking skills, interpersonal skills and self-confidence. Additionally, even though it was found statistically insignificant, a slight decline in their speaking anxiety level was observed. Taken together, the action was useful in supporting social and psychological factors that play a pivotal role in improvement of speaking skill. Action research studies designed to alleviate speaking anxiety in language classes reported similar findings concerning the improvement in social and affective factors. In an action research study (Koçak, 2010) designed to decrease speaking anxiety of primary school students, an increase in self-confidence of the participants was reported. The students expressed that they could speak more fluently as they felt more self-confident about speaking English. Likewise, Li (2016) designed an action research study to investigate the impact of drama technique on English speaking anxiety of Chinese EFL learners and she gave evidence that the technique was useful in supporting social and affective factors which in turn improve speaking skill. Similar to the present study, the study gave evidence on the predictors of anxiety linked to socio-psychological factors interacting with classroom social variables. Additionally, self-confidence was found to greatly influence the anxiety level and the willingness to communicate, which was directly or indirectly connected to fears of negative evaluation, public attention, face-protection and face loss. In the present study, the participants reported the positive influence of the assigned tasks on their self-confidence and interpersonal skills, so the action research was useful in supporting the socio-psychological factors that are the determinants of speaking skills.

On the other hand, it is obvious that prospective teachers are still in need of creative tasks in which they will use the target language for communication purposes inside or outside the classroom. The action could be revised in line with the participants' suggestions for future tasks. They suggested selecting more "current", "daily", "simple", "creative", "interesting" and "enjoyable" topics. Besides, they suggested choosing their own topics. Thus, potential topics could be negotiated with teacher trainees before they are assigned tasks. The second suggestion was about recording videos because the participants expressed their preference for acting out in class over video-recorded performances. In-class performances that could be integrated into the action plan are as follows: "holding street interviews and TV shows", or "performing short excerpts from movies".

Last but not least, while redesigning the tasks, the instructor of the lesson could benefit from the techniques suggested on alleviating high anxiety. Support groups suggested by Casado and Dereshiwsky (2001) allow students to discuss difficulties they face while speaking in target language, so after each task, prospective EFL teachers could discuss the difficulties or challenges they face while practicing the task. In the present study, the participants submitted written comments to the instructor. They could speak instead of write, so they will have much more chance to practice. Furthermore, they could analyze the difficulties of learning a foreign language. Because according to Casado and Dereshiwsky (2001), this technique might be beneficial for prospective EFL teachers experiencing high anxiety while speaking. As they lower the anxiety they experience, they gain self-consciousness about their foreign language learning process, and they might become more empathetic towards the difficulties their future students will encounter. Other techniques teacher trainers could utilize to lower speaking anxiety of prospective EFL teachers are the use of pair/group activities in classrooms, use of project work, and presenting a non-threatening classroom environment (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). Such techniques are already

used in the faculty of education where the study was conducted. However, the present study's participants were freshman prospective EFL teachers, so they might become more competent English speakers as they progress through the year levels. However, some relaxation techniques (breathing exercise) suggested by Toyama and Yamazaki (2021) could be enhanced to the Oral Communication Skills Course. Last, as suggested by Tüm (2012) teacher trainers should present a non-threatening environment where FLA was accepted as part of language learning, so it is useful for teacher trainers to familiarize with guidelines that will help prospective teachers that experience high FLA (set realistic self-expectations for proficiency, deep-breathing, and progressive relaxation exercises and so on.).

## CONCLUSION

This study was driven by the need to help freshman prospective EFL teachers control high FLA they felt while speaking during the compulsory course of "Oral Communication Skills-I". A 14-week action plan was designed to alleviate the FLA they felt while speaking and improve their speaking performance. Multiple sources of data were collected by means of quantitative and qualitative measures in order to evaluate the effect of the action plan on participants' speaking English. Regarding the qualitative results, the participants reported positive effects of the action on their speaking performance, interpersonal skills and self-confidence. Additionally, a slight decline in their speaking anxiety was revealed. On the other hand, a decline in their speaking performance was observed. Thus, despite the decline in their speaking performance, the action was useful in supporting socio-psychological factors that are significant determinants of speaking performance. Last, the results gave evidence on the need for similar actions that allow prospective teachers to use English for communicative purposes. The study provides significant clues for re-structuring the curriculum used in faculties of education. Conclusions and implications of the study are as follows:

The participants expressed they felt "anxious", "tense" and "fearful of making mistakes". Participants' negative feelings emerged when they had to speak with or in front of people to whom they were unfamiliar or when they were surrounded with people whom they thought as more proficient. They attributed their negative feelings to the perfectionist attitude of their parents. These results demonstrated the place of social factors in speaking performance of the prospective EFL teachers.

Moreover, they attributed their negative feelings to lack of practice during high school, which confirmed the findings of some prior studies (Hatipoğlu, 2016; Sevimli, 2007; Yıldırım, 2010) that investigated the washback effect of University Entrance Exam on English language learning of prospective EFL teachers (Hatipoğlu, 2016; Sevimli, 2007; Yıldırım, 2010). In these studies, it was reported that instead of developing teaching and testing materials and methods that would foster the development of the communicative skills of the students, teachers focused on preparing their students for the exam. Furthermore, instructional language in classes was predominantly Turkish. Lack of interaction or limited use of target language influences speaking skill of EFL learners negatively. Considering the statements of the participants in pre-action questions and results of the past studies (Hatipoğlu, 2016; Sevimli, 2007; Yıldırım, 2010), the participants might have been given little chance of practicing the target language and their exposure to the target language was limited as instructional language was predominantly Turkish.

Therefore, Turkish prospective EFL teachers should realize that they need to practice in order to overcome negative feelings such as shyness or anxiety. This finding gave evidence on that although freshman prospective teachers at faculties of education are expected to be high-level speakers of English, most of the students in language classes in high schools are not provided with much opportunity to practice the target language, so they have weak communicative skills when they start to study ELT in faculties of education. Thus, extra courses should be enhanced to the teacher training programs used at faculties of education to allow them to use English for communicative purposes. Moreover, they should be encouraged by the instructors to join speaking clubs or exchange programs.

Moreover, the techniques suggested on alleviating high anxiety (such as relaxation activities, discussion groups to discuss difficulties they face while speaking in target language) could be enhanced to the Oral Communication Skills Course (Casado & Dereshiwsy, 2001; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021).

The action did not positively influence speaking performances of prospective EFL teachers, which might have stemmed from two factors. First, the participants might have over-concentrated on grades as products, not on the process of performing well in the tasks. Because according to the qualitative data obtained from post-task questions, although they were aware of their weaknesses they did not spend much effort to compensate for them. They stated many weaknesses about their performances. Insufficient planning and preparation for the tasks were

frequently expressed. As another possibility, the decline in the speaking performance of the participants may be due to the restricted number of tasks assigned since mastering the speaking skill requires learners to practice a lot. Speaking in a foreign language is challenging for EFL learners because it involves simultaneous activation of several mental processes that are cognitive, physical and socio-cultural (Lestari, 2019).

The action was found to be useful in supporting social and psychological factors that play a pivotal role in improvement of speaking skill. Like the present study, another past study (Li, 2016) gave evidence on the predictors of the anxiety linked to socio-psychological factors interacting with classroom social variables. Additionally, self-confidence was found to greatly influence the anxiety level and the willingness to communicate, which was directly or indirectly connected to fears of negative evaluation, public attention, face-protection and face loss. In the present study, the participants reported the positive influence of the assigned tasks on their self-confidence and interpersonal skills, so the action research was useful in supporting the socio-psychological factors that are the determinants of speaking skills.

This present study has two limitations. First, rather than a product-oriented approach, a process-oriented approach could have been adopted while designing the action plan. After it was designed at the outset of the spring term, the action plan was implemented throughout the entire term and the data was analyzed at the end. Instead, the researchers could have re-structured the tasks in line with the comments of the participants, which might have encouraged the participants to focus on the process of performing well. Second, as the tasks were graded for midterm and final exams, 62 participants performed the tasks. The ones making comments for the post-task and post-action questions were less. The researchers could have taken precautions to obtain qualitative data from more participants.

**Statements of Publication Ethics**

Before conducting the action plan, ethics committee approval was obtained from Alanya Alaaddin Keykubat University (meeting no: 01, decision no: 17, and decision date: 17.03.2022). Afterwards, target participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the research. Moreover, they were informed that participation in the research was on a voluntary basis, and they could leave the research at any time. When withdrawing from the study, the participant should let the research team know that he/she/they wish to withdraw. A participant may provide the research team with the reason(s) for leaving the study but is not required to provide their reason. However, none of the participants expressed his/her wish to leave the research.

**Researchers’ Contribution Rate**

Authors	Literature review	Method	Data Collection	Data Analysis	Results	Conclusion
Derya UYSAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Sevgi GÖKÇE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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