Teachers' Perspectives on Assessing English Speaking Skills: A Post-New Exam Model Investigation

Merve Nur Dinçer[1] iD, Ministry of National Education
22281174@stu.omu.edu.tr
Betül Bal Gezegin[2] iD, Ondokuz Mayıs University, Faculty of Education
betul.balgezegin@omu.edu.tr

Abstract: This study investigates the secondary school English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perspectives on assessing English speaking skills after the new testing regulations introduced in the 2023-2024 academic year by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE). With the new regulations, students started to take English speaking exams for the first time in secondary schools in Türkiye. The study focuses on EFL teachers' perspectives, feelings, experiences, and thoughts regarding pre-, during, and post-exam situations in this adaptation process. In this qualitative study, data was gathered from 11 teachers via one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis revealed that EFL teachers find the speaking exams significant, necessary, and useful. In addition, the teachers reported feeling more motivated to use English in speaking activities in class after the new regulations. While teachers generally expressed positive sentiments regarding the introduction of speaking exams in secondary schools and the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues during the adaptation process, they also reported experiencing negative emotions, including feelings of unpreparedness, stress, burnout, fatigue, and hopelessness, largely due to the abrupt timing of the change. Several challenges were reported, including difficulties with adaptation, ineffective exam procedures, increased workloads for teachers, impractical grading procedures within the e-school system, and the overall demanding schedules faced by educators. For the future of speaking exams, teachers advocated for the continuation and sustainability of these exams, but they asked for improvement in the current situation. The findings of this study can serve as a valuable resource for English testing and evaluation, curriculum development, educational planning and programming, material development, in-service teacher training, and the preparation of pre-service EFL teachers, particularly in relation to speaking exams in secondary schools.

Keywords: *English speaking exam, Speaking skills, Assessment of speaking skills, Teachers' perspectives, English language teachers*

INTRODUCTION

The educational reforms carried out by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) in the last quarter century have enabled us to take steps to better teach English with a focus on the communicative purpose of the target language. In this regard, language teaching that covers all four language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and the integration of communicative language teaching (CLT) into foreign language education has been integrated step by step over the years (Kırkgöz, 2007). While writing and reading skills were necessary for years, speaking and listening skills were neglected, particularly in the assessment. The dilemma was that all these skills were included in the books and curricula, but the exams did not include especially the speaking skills, which also caused them to be neglected in the courses. According to CLT, all four skills are essential and

must be taught and assessed. Turkish MoNE has made arrangements and improvements in the English education curriculum at regular intervals so that primary, secondary, and high school English lessons can be given at sufficient levels and hours. Over time, we witnessed a gradual change in the curriculum and the exam systems.

At the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, secondary schools' English language examination system has been radically changed by the MoNE. Before this change, students took language exams twice a term in secondary schools, which were used to assess reading and writing skills. With the new regulation, the exam system has been phased by additional examination sessions, including listening and speaking exams. Including all four basic skills in the evaluation phase constitutes one part of the exam changes. According to the new regulations, the main exam measuring reading and writing skills is calculated out of 100 points and affects the student's grade by 50%. The whole school must hold this exam with the participation of all classes on the same day and time, that is, as a grade-wide exam. With the new regulation, it has been decided to hold two different exam sessions apart from this grade-wide exam. These new speaking and listening exams are evaluated out of 100 points, but each affects the student's grade by 25%. After the students complete all the exams, the average grade is calculated by the teachers and uploaded to the electronic grading system called "e-school."

With the introduction of the new regulations, English teachers in schools began collaborating to prepare exam questions. In addition, MoNE decided that teachers should eliminate multiple-choice questions in the exams and instead ask open-ended questions that do not contain options. The ministry shared sample exam scenarios with teachers for this transition and presented examples by showing the distribution of questions and functions by creating different scenarios with sample questions. With these arrangements, it is obvious that 21st-century skills are underlined again. Finally, one of the changes introduced in this context is the adjustment of the passing grade for the course. The course passing score, which was 45 out of 100 in previous years, was increased to 50 with the new regulations in 2023. All these adjustments and changes, especially the inclusion of speaking exams, have created a new agenda for the schools and language teachers. This research aims to analyze this change in the speaking exam model at the secondary school level from the teachers' perspective. The study focuses on the perspectives of secondary school English teachers because analyzing their thoughts, experiences, feelings, expectations, and problems as implementers of the new system can help improve the examination system in the coming years.

In the literature, there are a number of studies on language teachers' perceptions of teaching speaking. Adem and Berkessa (2022) examined EFL teachers' cognition about teaching speaking. The research used sequential mixed methods with a questionnaire and interviews with teachers. Gandeel (2016) explored the beliefs and practices of English language teachers in terms of teaching speaking with qualitative multiple-case research. Dağtan (2020) investigated the perceptions of Turkish ELT pre-service teachers and lecturers on learning and teaching English speaking skills in two phases via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. However, the number of studies on assessing speaking skills is limited in the literature. Nurhalimah et al. (2020) explored and described English teachers' beliefs and their practices of speaking assessment through a semi-structured interview. It was found that English language teachers need guidance in conducting effective speaking assessments. Plo et al. (2013) investigated the teaching of oral skills in secondary education in a local Spanish context by surveying teachers. They reported that oral skills were not sufficiently practiced and/or assessed, although it was required in the language policies.

Since assessing speaking skills in secondary schools as a part of new regulations is a recent case for Türkiye, it is not likely to find studies done particularly on this topic. However, a few studies have been conducted in similar veins but in different contexts. For example, Özdemir (2018) investigated the administration process and teachers' attitudes toward speaking exams, which became compulsory in high schools in Türkiye in 2014. She found out that there was no standard process for speaking assessment among schools, and teachers gave higher marks in the speaking exams. Similarly, Çalışkan (2013) researched instructors' attitudes and practices in assessing English speaking skills. She

used mixed methods research to gather data to understand the relationship between attitudes and practices with the gender, educational background, teaching experience, and English proficiency levels of instructors in three universities in İstanbul. Her study concluded that speaking is the most neglected skill in the assessment. Özdemir-Yılmazer and Özkan (2017) carried out a study on tertiary-level English language teachers' perceptions and practices of speaking assessment and reported that there is a need for teacher training on the assessment of speaking skills.

The new exam system affected millions of secondary school students and thousands of English teachers in Türkiye. Obtaining comprehensive opinions of teachers about the exam can help us learn about the exam processes and reveal positive and negative situations about the current state of the exam practices, as well as the general perspectives of the teachers. A deeper analysis of this new experience can contribute to the literature. Based on this gap, this study aims to examine one part of the exam system introduced in the 2023-2024 academic year from the perspective of secondary school EFL teachers, focusing on "assessment and testing of speaking." In this study, the answers to the following research questions were searched:

1. What are the overall thoughts of EFL teachers about the recent English-speaking exams after the current regulations in the secondary school examination system in Türkiye?
2. What do EFL teachers feel about the recent English-speaking exam system in Türkiye?
3. What have EFL teachers experienced during the implementation of the recent English-speaking exams?
4. What are the future thoughts of EFL teachers related to the recent English-speaking exams at secondary schools?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was used in this study. Qualitative research design was used because this method allows a deep understanding of participants' experiences, opinions, and emotions. This way, it becomes possible to explore the nuances of the subject and provide a more comprehensive analysis. Data were collected via one-on-one interviews. Eleven EFL teachers (male n=2; female n=9) working at various public secondary schools participated in this study. The participating teachers, whose professional experience ranged from 1 to 15 years, worked in cities, towns, and villages and were selected from five different cities in Türkiye purposively. They taught at different levels in the 2023-2024 academic year at secondary schools. In the selection of these teachers, different professional experiences and workplaces were taken into consideration to add richness to the study. The names of the participants were kept confidential, and pseudonyms were given to refer them from P1 to P11 according to the order in which they were interviewed. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants agreed to provide consent.

Data Collection Tools

The data was collected via semi-structured interviews conducted one-on-one with teachers to get a deeper understanding of the current situation under focus. The first part of the interview included demographic questions. Background information about the education, years of experience, age, gender, school place, city, and organization type were gathered. In the following parts, under the A, B, C, D, and E categories, 29 questions were asked (Appendix A). These questions were about teachers' readiness, thoughts, feelings, observations regarding students, testing and assessment instruments and processes, and future exams. A pilot application was carried out with two participants to test the interview questions. Following these practices, the interview questions were rearranged and improved. Five of the interviews were carried out online via Zoom meetings, and six were face-to-face. All interviews were audio recorded to be analysed later on. The teachers explained their experiences, feelings, and suggestions during the interviews about the new speaking examination system by giving personal examples. The researchers obtained further information by asking extra questions where

needed. Each interview lasted about 30-40 minutes. The data collection process was carried out within the planned schedule after the ethical permission of the Ondokuz Mayıs University Ethics Committee was taken.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data obtained from the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers identified codes, categories, and themes. As a second step, an expert's opinion was taken to strengthen and ensure the study's interrater reliability. The compatibility of the first codes created by the researchers was checked using a sample section from the interviews; the researchers exchanged ideas, and code edits were made again. Thus, the coding was cross-examined.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the data yielded eight categories and four themes (Table 1). The themes were "teachers' overall thoughts," "teachers' feelings," "teachers' experiences and observations," and "future thoughts on speaking exams," which are further discussed below.

Table 1. Categories and Themes

Themes	Categories
Theme 1 Teachers' Overall Thoughts	Positive thoughts related to the recent speaking exams
	Negative thoughts related to the recent speaking exams
Themes	**Categories**
Theme 2 Teachers' Feelings	Positive feelings related to the recent speaking exams
	Negative feelings related to the recent speaking exams
Themes	**Categories**
Theme 3 Experiences and Observations	Problems and limitations of the recent speaking exams
	Procedural observations of the new speaking exams
Themes	**Categories**
Theme 4 Future Thoughts	Expectations, beliefs, and requests for speaking exams
	Recommendations to improve the speaking exams

Theme 1: Teachers' Overall Thoughts on the New Speaking Exam

Positive Thoughts Related to The Recent Speaking Exams

The participant teachers emphasized the necessity and usefulness of speaking exams for enhancing language learning skills. They noted that such exams aligned the learning process more closely with the curriculum and course materials, which included speaking objectives and activities. It has been reported that speaking exams can motivate students and teachers to engage more actively in English while boosting their self-confidence in oral activities. In addition, many teachers highlighted the benefits of departmental collaboration (department, meaning a group of language teachers working at the same schools) in preparing and implementing the exams. Additionally, they emphasized that speaking exams contribute significantly to students' increasing confidence in speaking English. Recent

regulations regarding speaking assessments suggest a heightened emphasis on oral proficiency, which appears to have positively influenced teachers' perceptions of its importance. All the participating teachers agreed that speaking exams should be compulsory. Furthermore, they believe four skills are important and should be assessed equally. The following comments support these ideas.

Speaking exams should be compulsory because, in the end, if we teach this skill, I need to assess if it is covered under a curriculum. It is definitely necessary. (P3) (Compulsory, necessary)

I think that speaking exams should be compulsory because only studying grammar or listening can help students up to a point. It is important to speak a language well if we are learning it. (P10) (Compulsory, important)

According to the participating teachers, the speaking exams introduced in the recent regulations strengthened the alignment among the curriculum, textbooks, and classroom practice. While the curriculum previously included speaking objectives and activities practiced in lessons using textbooks, the absence of clear criteria in practical assessments had created a disconnect. The new regulations addressed this issue and resulted in a more harmonized approach to language instruction. Teachers emphasized that updated speaking exams better integrate the English learning process with curriculum and course materials. One of the participant teachers reflected on this saying:

Having exams that are compatible with the curriculum is a positive development. If there is an objective, there must be an assessment of it. (P11) (Compatible with the curriculum, necessity)

Several teachers reported an increase in their use of English in the classroom following the introduction of the new English-speaking exam. This shift is not confined to designated speaking activities but extends to the general language teachers use during instruction. As a result, teachers became more inclined to incorporate spoken English into their lessons. Some participants also expressed greater motivation to prepare for speaking activities than the previous year, attributing this to the increased emphasis on oral proficiency in the new regulations. The following statement illustrates this:

Speaking was a skill I ignored in class (primarily due to the lack of class hours). Now, I try to give more importance to it. (P5) (Speak more English, more important)

Teachers also noted that the recent speaking exam has influenced their selection of classroom activities. The following excerpts illustrate this impact:

I started to think that I should prepare more speaking activities for students. In fact, it showed me that I, as a teacher, should do more speaking activities than the students...I include it more in my activities. However, while I wanted to include all the skills, unfortunately, I cannot complete my weekly plan. (P5) (More speaking activities)

The increase in students' self-confidence in speaking was created as a code because most of the participating teachers stressed that speaking exams pushed students to speak at least during the exams. As a result of the compulsory speaking time during exams, every student, even the shyest ones, had a chance to speak even if they were initially reluctant. Teachers reported that this situation made students realize that they could speak English and increased their self-confidence. Here are two excerpts supporting this:

The students' self-confidence began to increase, and they began to perceive English as a language. In addition, thanks to speaking exams, students' self-confidence increases, whereas children who have difficulty expressing themselves in writing can get higher grades. (P1) (Increasing self-confidence)

It was gratifying to see the students express themselves in the target language and <u>increase their self-confidence</u>. (P8) (Increasing self-confidence)

Based on the teachers' observations, these exams appeared to raise students' awareness about speaking. Students started to place greater emphasis on their speaking skills and approached it more seriously. As a result, teachers viewed the speaking exams as beneficial, and this positively influenced their attitudes towards them.

Now, when we have speaking activities in the coursebook, I warn students that they may encounter this section in the speaking exam; at least <u>some students pay attention this way</u>, and <u>we practice English in those sections more carefully</u>. (P7) (Increasing the awareness)

Unfortunately, we were not used to giving students enough opportunity to speak. <u>Maybe this exam can increase this mindset</u>. (P5) (Increasing the awareness)

While discussing the speaking exams, teachers answered questions about working together, collaborating, cooperating as a team, experiencing grade-wide exams, and the exam preparation process with their colleagues. It is evident from their expressions that most teachers benefitted from this working style. Even if the number of exams was multiplied with the new regulations and the workload was increased, the participants shared that they were happy to divide their responsibilities with their colleagues. In their opinion, discussing with their colleagues and getting suggestions from other colleagues was helpful for a healthy examination system.

I find it <u>logical that the exams are shared among the school department.</u> (P7) (sharing duties)

I believe that <u>it is a positive process that strengthens communication within the English department</u> and uses common sense. (P8) (positive process)

Negative Thoughts Related to The Recent Speaking Exams

Teachers interviewed reported several challenges of the new examination system, particularly regarding the functionality of exams. These include deliberate oversimplification of exams by teachers, ineptly prepared and non-authentic exams, answers with ready-made patterns, rote memorization by students, unrealistic results with inflated grades that do not reflect reality, and exams that fail to fulfill pedagogical goals. Teachers stated that they did not want students to get low grades; they oversimplified the exams to help them, gave inflated grades, gave students texts beforehand so they could memorize them, and gave exam questions in the form of worksheets beforehand. This situation affects the ability of an actual exam to serve its purpose, and it is understood from the data collected that those teachers were also aware of this situation. Participating teachers considered this situation a serious problem and a limitation of the speaking exams. They were well aware of the difference between the ideal and the reality. They also expressed their professional dissatisfaction and discomfort with this situation, as seen in the excerpts below.

I work in a crowded school where students come from different villages. The success level of students is relatively low. <u>We were giving high scores so that children could pass the course.</u> The system was pushing us to do this…I often witness teachers worrying about this more than the students. (P4) (Inflated grades)

<u>Grades do not reflect students' actual performance. The children were given ready-made patterns, and they memorized them.</u> (P3) (Rote memorization, ready-made patterns, unrealistic exam results)

Teachers' lack of guidance and unexpected changes in the exam policy were other issues reported by the participants. One of the teachers explained that this process was put into practice suddenly, and there was insufficient information and guidance on what to do by the teachers.

Some teachers stated that they had never administered a speaking exam before. They indicated that they needed more information, guidance, and time to be efficient before starting the process as a whole. Such sudden changes made without consulting teachers and without notifying the schools created problems. Statements supporting this view are shared below:

> The mentality that it will get better with time is something that should never be implemented in the education system. Sudden changes in the process are doomed to falter. If we are going to evaluate all the content we teach, exams assessing them should be mandatory. But it needs to be guided correctly. (P3) (Sudden changes, need for guidance)

The interviewed teachers also reported that the sudden change in the examination system (sometime after the schools started) caused a big chaos for the teachers. They felt unprepared to face this new situation and thus developed negative feelings. Almost all of the teachers stated that they were not ready for this change in the examination system and were puzzled and panicked. Teachers were also asked if the children felt prepared, and they all stated that neither the students nor the teachers were ready.

> Of course, we were not ready because something like this suddenly came into our lives; yes, we speak English in the classrooms to a certain extent. This is the language we teach, but everything was so sudden. We were informed about a week before the exam week. (P1) (Lack of teacher preparedness)

> Such a transition had to be made at the end of the year before the new semester began. The preparation process had to be planned well. It took some time for the students to get used to the new examination system, and the students were never ready. (P9) (Lack of students' preparedness)

Theme 2. Teachers' Feelings

The second research question explored how language teachers felt about the newly implemented speaking exam system. The data revealed both positive and negative emotions. On the positive side, teachers reported increased motivation for both themselves and their students to engage more in English speaking, more frequent speaking activities, heightened student self-awareness regarding their speaking skills and performance on exams, a sense of professional fulfillment, and the benefits of collaboration within the English department at their schools.

> I feel more at ease knowing that I'm fulfilling my responsibilities as a teacher. Before, something felt incomplete, but now I can say it feels more professionally rewarding. (P5) (Professional satisfaction)

> I definitely feel like it was a long-overdue decision. I think I finally found the right path. I have positive emotions. I feel satisfied as a teacher now. (P1) (Professional satisfaction)

The teachers also explained negative feelings about the speaking exam system. These can be listed as professional dissatisfaction, reflection on students' negative feelings toward the teachers, stress factors related to the 8th grades (they have to take a nationwide exam to enroll in high schools), and burnout due to time pressure. In the interviews with teachers, it is understood that overall, teachers were not satisfied with the speaking exams they delivered. Teachers felt professionally inadequate and dissatisfied due to negative situations such as unsuccessful exam practices, inflated grades, time management, adaptation problems to sudden changes, and student failures. As a result, they often questioned their professional competence. All of these situations can be categorized as professional dissatisfaction. Here is an excerpt from one of the teachers on how he felt:

Unfortunately, <u>speaking exams did not satisfy me professionally</u>. I do not feel comfortable at all. I have done research on how speaking is taught and how it is evaluated from the sources I follow myself, <u>but I feel very inadequate</u>. Every time, I wish my institution would support me, provide teachers with quality and efficient in-service training, feel more self-confident towards our students, and experience the satisfaction of success in our classrooms. Unfortunately, since this is not the case because our textbooks are not good enough and <u>I cannot feel that I am a professional teacher, I find myself questioning every exam period, filled with regret</u>. (P5) (Professional dissatisfaction)

Teachers reported that they felt stress due to students' feeling anxious, fearful, low-motivated, bored, panicky, and reluctant due to the increase in exam loads and encountering a new type of exam they had never experienced before.

<u>Students said they did not want a speaking exam</u> due to their habit of taking ongoing written exams. <u>This negatively affected my motivation to prepare for the speaking exam.</u> (P6) (Affected emotion)

Teachers stated that they were under constant time pressure. This time pressure was related to meeting the exam schedule and completing the syllabus on time. Busy exam week schedule, inability to cover the required topics on time, and keeping up with the curriculum were some of the challenging outcomes of the new regulations regarding English exams. Regarding children taking 19-20 exams in just two weeks (at Imam Hatip secondary schools), teachers often stated that they acted under a lot of time pressure with the new exam regulations. All of these reasons cause negative feelings such as stress in teachers, as seen in the excerpt below.

At Imam Hatip secondary school, children take 19-20 exams in two weeks. Also, in the third week, <u>I have to administer the exams of the children who do not come for the exams on time</u>. When you think about this for the first and second exams in two terms, a significant amount of time of a semester is given to the exams only. There are ten units in our curriculum, and <u>completing the units in the remaining time was almost impossible especially this year.</u> I feel under pressure all the time. (P4) (Busy schedule, time pressure, need for improvements)

Teachers frequently expressed their negative feelings about this sudden transition and the problems they encountered afterward in interviews. Boredom, exhaustion, fatigue, anger, anxiety, pessimism, stress, hopelessness, helplessness, panic, and resentment are some emotional states teachers describe about the sudden transition to the new examination system.

Theme 3: Experiences and Observations

One of the aims of this research was to explore teachers' experiences and observations of the new speaking exams. Interviews revealed that large class sizes lead to multiple issues, such as time constraints, noise, discipline problems, and extended exam hours. Teachers reported that students typically speak for 5-10 minutes, and exams can take up to 1-3 class periods to complete. They noted that while administering one-on-one exams, other students were disrupted, and exams that exceeded one class period worsened the tight exam schedule.

I call students to my desk individually, following the class list. While the rest are expected to listen quietly, a few always make noise, get distracted, or stand up and move. Some even try to help their classmates by mimicking answers or whispering hints secretly. This becomes more challenging to manage in crowded classrooms, especially when facing time pressure during the exam. (P4) (Classroom management problems)

Another problem teachers have experienced is related to the grading and e-school systems in which they had to upload the grades. The e-school system poses challenges for teachers, as they must manually calculate and enter each student's scores from the three-stage English exam (listening,

speaking, reading/writing), with speaking accounting for 25%. There is no available feature to calculate these percentages automatically, and this was reported to lead to time-consuming manual work. Additionally, students could only see their final average, not their exam scores individually. This was confusing, especially when grades were rounded up due to system limitations.

The conditions under which teachers administered and prepared the speaking tests were also discussed in the interviews, and significant differences in practice were found. For example, inconsistencies were observed in several areas, such as whether exams were conducted one-on-one or in groups, whether standardized rubrics were used for evaluation, the timing of feedback (during or after the exams), the limited or complete absence of feedback, varying exam formats, and differences in the exam duration for individual students and classes. These variations were identified as significant limitations and challenges in the new speaking exam system.

Theme 4: Future Thoughts

The final research question aimed to investigate teachers' future thoughts and recommendations for the new speaking exam system. Analysis of the interviews revealed a consensus among teachers that the current speaking exam format needs to be revised and requires significant updates and improvements. None of the participants stated that the exams should continue in their present form. A prominent suggestion from most teachers was to increase speaking course hours, with many advocating for a dedicated lesson focused on speaking skills to enhance student competencies and the overall effectiveness of the exams. Although there are speaking activities and objectives in the curriculum, many participants stated that the curriculum needed to be revised to prepare students for this exam. Participants argued that speaking activities should be increased and the quality of the speaking activities should be improved both in the books and in practice.

> For speaking courses, topics such as public speaking should be added to the curriculum, and students should be able to improve various speaking skills, such as addressing, fluency, and using gestures and facial expressions. (P6) (More activities in the curriculum)

According to teachers, the abrupt implementation of the new exam system after the academic year began was challenging. Many teachers suggested that the transition should occur gradually, either by phasing in the exam system by grade level or by modifying the system over several years instead of all at once.

One of the recommendations from teachers to enhance the speaking exam was providing in-service training for those who need it. Over time, teachers may naturally experience professional inadequacy and require opportunities to update their knowledge and seek guidance. During the interviews, several teachers voiced their need for such training and emphasized the importance of planning and delivering these programs. Here is an excerpt addressing this issue:

> I wish my institution would support me and provide teachers with quality and efficient in-service training. I would feel more self-confident towards our students and experience the satisfaction of success in my classrooms. (P5)

Lastly, the teachers emphasized the need for more transparent communication regarding expectations for the new practices, including goals and implementation strategies, believing that these measures could significantly enhance the effectiveness of the exams. They also recommended improvements to the classroom environment to elevate exam quality further, specifically reducing class sizes, addressing issues of noise and discipline, and equipping classrooms with technological tools. Additionally, participants suggested that a well-defined educational calendar and timely announcements could alleviate existing problems. A better-planned timetable would allow teachers and students to prepare more effectively for the exams, improving performance and greater psychological comfort for all involved.

DISCUSSION

This study found that the teachers' overall opinions were optimistic about the speaking exam in secondary schools. They found it essential, necessary, and valuable, supporting the previously mentioned studies. They believed that speaking exams were beneficial and that all four language skills should be measured. This finding is in line with Dağtan (2020), Duran (2011), and Özdemir (2018), who showed that teachers and students had a positive attitude toward speaking exams. Similarly, Gopal and Embi's (2014) results also showed that language teachers held positive beliefs and practices of communicative language testing and were aware of its principles, which also agrees with the findings of our study.

When the negative opinions of these teachers were examined, several different reasons emerged. The first of these is related to changes' being so abrupt. One of the most negative situations that almost all teachers stated in the interviews was the sudden changes they had to undergo without preparation. Teachers indicated that they did not receive enough guidance at the beginning of the term, there were disconnections in the process, and that teachers and students were not ready for this sudden transition. Inflated grades to encourage students to speak are found to be a problem in the current research, and this is in parallel with the findings of Özdemir (2018).

Similarly, Gopal and Embi (2014) indicated that teachers encounter main constraints during the speaking assessment process. In this study, although the general thoughts of the teachers are positive, problems in practice come to the fore, such as poorly implemented assessments, as indicated by Atjonen (2014). The current study revealed problems similar to those of Nurhalimah et al. (2020), who underlined teachers' weaknesses regarding speaking assessment and the need for guidance regarding rubric development and implementation of speaking assessment. The exact needs were also identified as a result of this research.

When teachers' feelings about speaking exams were examined, most teachers did not feel ready to start speaking exams in 2023-2024. It seems that the participants had difficulty keeping up with the unexpected change. One common issue was the extent of anxiety experienced by teachers. Most participating teachers became stressed when they heard that secondary school speaking exams would be mandatory. These feelings were further detailed in the interviews, and feelings such as anger, hopelessness, burnout, boredom, and fatigue were also identified.

When teachers working as single teachers in their schools were excluded, teachers in schools with more than one English teacher worked together and cooperated in the new exam process. The details indicate that most teachers encounter fundamental issues during the speaking exam, as Gopal and Embi (2014) also found. When teachers' discourses are examined, these are lack of teacher and student preparedness, lack of teacher preparation and guidance (Brumen & Cagran, 2011), not giving enough space to speaking skills in the curriculum and textbooks, inefficiency of exams (Atjonen, 2014; Özdemir, 2018), crowded classroom problems, impracticality of grading and e-school system, increased workload for teachers and lastly teachers' and students' feeling overwhelmed under time pressure.

One of the findings of this study was that most teachers tried to use a rubric jointly prepared by the English departments at their schools. Gandeel (2016) showcased that teachers' beliefs and practices lacked a theoretical basis, thus not aligning with the contemporary views on speaking skills. She underlined that teachers had little or no focus on fluency. Grada (2014) also supported her findings. According to Grada (2014), teachers base their assessment practices considering spoken language mainly on linguistic content. On the contrary, the current study's findings from interviews show that EFL teachers prioritized fluency as a criterion in rubrics.

Teachers using various exam techniques and question types were also identified in the interviews. In the exams, question, and answer, giving instructions/explanations/description, presentation, and talking about the pictures were the speaking exam techniques most preferred by

teachers. Nurhalimah et al. (2020) indicated that teachers' assessment of speaking skills could differ for multiple reasons, such as teachers' educational background, teaching experience, and the school context. Çalışkan (2013) showed that educational background and experience could be factors in choosing assessment tools and techniques for speaking exams. Furthermore, Ahmad (2021) discovered that numerous contextual factors like classroom contexts, institutional requirements, and curriculum expectations influenced teachers' assessment practices. In the current study, there were teachers with different experiences or educational backgrounds who work in villages, towns, or cities, and it is obvious that the teachers who participated in the current study also experienced contextual differences.

When teachers' ideas, expectations, suggestions, and wishes regarding the future of speaking exams are considered, findings indicate that most teachers think that speaking tests can be improved over time. However, most teachers do not want speaking exams and new regulations to continue in their current form. Recommendations were received from teachers through interviews on how speaking exams could be improved in the future. The teachers' suggestions are more hours of English courses, curriculum planning with more speaking activities, regulation in the e-school system and exam scoring system, in-service training, and more guidance for teachers. Finally, it was recommended that teachers undergo additional training to assess speaking, a finding similar to what Brumen and Cagran (2011) reported.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Overall, the teachers find the speaking exams important, necessary, and valuable. According to them, four language skills should be assessed. However, it was also found that although teachers had generally positive feelings about introducing speaking exams in secondary schools, they also felt negative feelings such as unpreparedness, stress, burnout, fatigue, and hopelessness due to unexpected changes. Nevertheless, it was observed that teachers enjoyed and were satisfied with being in collaboration with their colleagues. With these new exam regulations, teachers became more motivated to participate in speaking activities and use English in the lessons. This study also identified problems such as adaptation problems, ineffective exams, increased workload of teachers, impractical grading and e-school system, and teachers' busy schedules. The part of the study on future speaking exams revealed teachers' expectations, predictions, and aspirations for the future of speaking exams. Accordingly, teachers think these exams will continue but should be developed and improved. Teachers generally believe that the problems with these exams can be solved over time.

When planning such significant changes, it may be good to motivate teachers by including them at every stage of policymakers' decision-making and planning process. Teachers' feeling of being professionally and psychologically prepared can prevent many problems in education before they arise. Additionally, being influential individuals in the decision-making mechanism, rather than being informed at the last minute, can affect them positively. It is natural for teachers and students to experience problems adapting to new systems. However, as most teachers state, gradual transitions instead of sudden and sharp transitions can alleviate the challenging effects of these changes and ensure better management of the adaptation process. Determining the educational calendar, decisions, and regulations before the academic year begins may be more welcome than changes made in the middle of the year. It is vital that teachers are informed in as much detail as possible when changes are made to educational planning. Resources that teachers who need information should be shared on time and be accessible easily. Guidance should be planned, and teachers should benefit from online or on-site in-service training. In this way, teachers may feel more comfortable completing their shortcomings and achieve greater professional satisfaction with the exams they prepare and administer. Speaking exams can also function better this way.

While designing materials, speaking activities should be diversified into more meaningful, authentic, and communicative activities in which students will participate more. The rate of speaking activities in textbooks can be increased, and students can be enabled to speak more. Regulations regarding class hours and exam schedules can regulate teachers' concerns about completing subjects and exams on time. Teachers can work more efficiently when they are not under intense stress.

Relieving teachers' workload and offering alternatives to teachers working in different schools under different conditions can relieve teachers because teachers working in crowded classes or schools with heavy course loads, such as Imam Hatip Secondary Schools, work beyond their capacity under time pressure. This arrangement can eliminate problems and increase the quality of the exams.

This research determined that teachers used different exam practices. Having more defined frameworks for standardizing speaking exams in secondary schools may yield better results regarding the validity and reliability of the exams. Additionally, from a more technical point of view, if the factors that slow down the functioning of the e-school system and make teachers' work difficult are regulated, the workflow can become more practical. The exam scoring system may be kept more transparent so that students will not have difficulty understanding it.

Considering all these mentioned above, the findings of this study may be indicative for policymakers to make speaking exams more reliable, valid, standardized, practical, beneficial, and positive from teachers' and students' perspectives. In addition, teachers and other researchers can evaluate their experiences in this field in the light of this study and take initiatives to improve and develop speaking exams. Future research could include longitudinal studies to track changes over time or comparative studies to evaluate the impact of various teaching methods on student engagement.

REFERENCES

Adem, H., & Berkessa, M. (2022). EFL teachers' cognitions about teaching speaking skills. *GIST – Education and Learning Research Journal*, *24*, 65–94. https://doi.org/10.26817/16925777.1308

Ahmad, S. (2021). *Teachers' Beliefs about Assessment: A Multiple Narrative Case Study of Internationally Educated Teachers' Assessment of Speaking Skills in Canadian ESL/EAP Classrooms.* University of Toronto.

Atjonen, P. (2014). Teachers' views of their assessment practice. *The Curriculum Journal*, *25*(2), 238–259. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2013.874952

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101

Brumen, M., & Cagran, B. (2011). Teachers' perspectives and practices in assessing young foreign language learners in three Eastern European countries. *Education 3-13*, *39*(5), 541–559. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2010.488243

Çalışkan, E. (2013). *Instructors' Attitudes and Practices on Assessing English Speaking Skill*. İstanbul University.

Dağtan, E. (2020). *An investigatıon into the perceptions of Turkish ELT pre-service teachers and lecturers on the learning and teaching of English speaking skills*. Çukurova University.

Duran, Ö. (2011). *Teachers' and students' perceptions about classroom-based speaking tests and their washback.* Bilkent University.

Gandeel, A.M. (2016). *English Language Teachers' Beliefs and Practices regarding the Teaching of Speaking.* The University of Leeds.

Gopal, P., & Embi, M. A. B. (2014). Teachers' Belief and Practices regarding Communicative Language Testing In Malaysian Secondary School. *International Conference on Postgraduate Research 2014*, *1*(2), 357–367.

Grada, T.K. (2014). *An Investigation into Libyan EFL Novice Secondary School Teachers' Current Knowledge and Practice of Speaking Assessment: A Socio-cultural Perspective.* University of Exeter.

Kirkgoz, Y. (2007). English language teaching in Turkey: Policy changes and implementations. *RELC Journal*, *38*(2), 216–228. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688207079696

Nurhalimah, N., Husna HR, N., & Hidayat, D. N. (2020). An exploration of English teachers' beliefs and practices of speaking assessment: Bring English teachers into focus. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture*, *6*(5), 41–48. https://doi.org/10.21744/ijllc.v6n5.990

Özdemir, C. (2018). *Assessing the speaking skill: an investigation into achievement tests of the 9th grade students in Anatolian high schools*. Pamukkale University.

Özdemir-Yılmazer, M., & Özkan, Y. (2017). Speaking assessment perceptions and practices of English teachers at tertiary level in the Turkish context. *Language Learning in Higher Education*, *7*(2), 371-391.

Plo, R., Hernero, A., & Mur-Duenas, P. (2013). Implementing the teaching/learning of oral skills in secondary education in Aragón: Gauging teachers' attitudes, beliefs and expectations. *International Journal of English Studies*, *14*(1), 55–77.

APPENDIX A

The Interview Questions

SEMI-STRUCTURED OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR EFL TEACHERS

I agree to participate in this interview study with my consent and to have my answers recorded as voice recordings and used anonymously in the relevant scientific research.

…/…./20..

……….……….

Answer the Questions
Years of experience as an EFL teacher…………………………..…………….
The city you work …………………………..…………………..………………
Education   Associate Degree   B.A   M.A   PhD
The grades you currently teach   5   6   7   8
Gender   Women   Man

Speaking exams became compulsory starting from the 2023-2014 academic year. It was also decided that this exam would be prepared jointly for all classes by the Turkish MoNE. Regarding this;

A. Teachers' Readiness
1. As an English teacher, were you ready to start giving speaking exams at the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year?

B. Teachers' Thoughts and Feelings
1. What are your general feelings about speaking exams at secondary schools?
2. What do you think about the new regulations for speaking exams at secondary schools?
3. Should speaking exams be mandatory? Why or why not? Explain it, please.
4. How did you feel when you first heard that speaking exams would be compulsory in secondary school?
5. Did the speaking exams you prepared and administered satisfy you professionally as an EFL teacher?
6. According to your experience, did administering the speaking tests motivate you to speak more English in the lessons, in general? Please explain.
7. What do you think about increasing the English course passing grade to 50 points from 45 out of 100?

C. Observations Regarding Students
1. Based on your observations, were students ready to switch to this system?
2. Based on your observation, how did students feel about speaking exams?

3. Did the students experience adaptation problems to the new speaking exams? If so, please describe your observations.
4. What kind of feedback did you receive from students regarding the speaking exam, and how did it affect you?
5. Compulsory English course in secondary school is 3 hours in the 5th and 6th grades and 4 hours in the 7th and 8th grades. Are these lesson hours sufficient to prepare students for the speaking exam? Why or why not?
6. Do the grades after the exam reflect the students' in-class speaking performance? Please explain.
7. According to your experience, did taking the speaking test motivate the students to speak more English in the lessons? Please explain.

D. Testing And Assessment Instruments and Process
1. How do you evaluate joint preparation and administration of the speaking exam by English departments?
2. What are your ideas about arranging exam dates? How do you set the dates?
3. Did you explain the rules of the speaking exam and how the exam would happen to the children before the exam?
4. What are the main problems you face during a speaking exam?
5. Do you use a scale to grade your students? If yes, is this scale prepared jointly by all English department teachers, or does every teacher at a school prepare it themselves?
6. Can you describe your classroom environment during the speaking exams?
7. How long does the speaking exam take on average for a student?
8. How long does the speaking exam take on average to test the whole class?
9. Did you give feedback to the children about their speaking performance after the exam? If you did, explain how, and if not, explain why not.
10. According to your experiences this academic year, what are the limitations of speaking exams?
11. What are the benefits of speaking exams according to your experience?

E. About Future Exams
1. What would you recommend to improve the speaking exam? In your opinion, how would it be better?
2. Do you think this examination system and regulations will continue in the future?
3. Would you like the new regulations to continue in their current form in the future?