



# Exploring the Influences on English-Speaking Anxiety for EFL Students in International Exchange Programs

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## Abstract

English-speaking anxiety (ESA) among EFL students has been widely studied, and among the factors affecting these language learning processes of students, the interaction of different cultures is one of the main factors in the concept of international exchange programs (Kim, 2009; Tiran et al., 2013). Exploring this dimension, which is mostly dealt with nations in broad concepts, in the context of specific nationality groups sharing specific cultural viewpoints each, such as Spanish and Turkish, this study addresses this gap by examining the impact of overseas experiences gained through international exchange programs on English-speaking anxiety among EFL learners, specifically examining the experiences of Spanish and Turkish students. Employing a qualitative research approach, data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions, providing rich, descriptive insights into the participants' experiences. The sample consisted of 10 third-year EFL students, with 5 from Turkey and 5 from Spain, who participated in the Erasmus+ Student Exchange Mobility program. Therefore, qualitative data were collected through the semi-structured interviews, and this semi-structured interview is supposed to involve a set of nine open-ended questions allowing for spontaneous and in-depth responses subjected to thematic analysis. These open-ended questions are shaped by prior experience with English, the impact of the exchange program, specific situations and coping strategies, interactions with native speakers, language learning activities, cultural and social influences, received support, factors reducing anxiety, and advice for future students. The findings revealed that cultural exposure significantly influences students' English-speaking anxiety, highlighting themes of adaptation, peer interaction, and self-efficacy. Participants reported that engaging with diverse cultural contexts not only alleviated their anxiety but also fostered greater confidence in their speaking abilities. This study underscores the significance of understanding the nuanced dynamics of English-speaking anxiety in the context of international exchange programs. Participants' insights suggest that cultural agents should be taken into account for both groups, but also that the preparation of formal/informal social interaction components before participating in the program can contribute to the existing intercultural experiences of both groups. By this way, the study offers valuable implications for educators and program coordinators aiming to enhance language learning experiences.

**Keywords:** Overseas experiences, international exchange programs, English-speaking anxiety, cultural exposure, Erasmus+

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## 1. Introduction

Intercultural exchange and international interaction have been increased by globalisation and the advancement of communication technologies. As an outcome, the value of a global language like English has grown even more, as has the demand for learning English as a foreign language. In many nations, English is taught as the foreign language, and it has grown to be a necessary ability, particularly for students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It enables students to mingle with a different culture and practice their English through practical encounters. These opportunities can assist students in lowering their nervousness when speaking in English and enhancing their speaking abilities (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Concern over speaking a foreign language well, however, is a common problem, especially among EFL students and foreign language speaking anxiety is a common challenge that many language learners face (Jugo, 2020). It can be defined as the fear and nervousness that arise when a learner attempts to speak in a target language, such as English. This anxiety can hinder the learner's ability to effectively communicate, leading to feelings of frustration and decreased confidence. The fear of speaking English could impede language learning and prevent students from expressing themselves. In this context, programs for international exchange might be extremely important. Students who take part in these programs have the opportunity to travel and live abroad while having the opportunity to overcome speaking anxiety by imposing language.

### 1.1 *Language Speaking anxiety (FLSA)*

FLSA is a complex phenomenon that is unique to the individual, consisting of the individual's self-perceptions as well as beliefs and past behavior patterns (Horwitz, Horwitz ve Cope, 1986). Furthermore, emerging research (Woodrow, 2006; Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017; Dewaele, Albakistani & Ahmed, 2024) indicates that anxiety has two dimensions, much like a coin has two sides, emphasizing that it consists of state anxiety and trait anxiety. State anxiety, caused by tension, anxiety, and nervousness related to the individual and the stimulation of the autonomic nervous system due to environmental factors, is a more transient phenomenon that occurs in specific situations. In contrast, trait anxiety is a stable reaction directly related to the individual's characteristics. As this both contains distinct challenges for learners, revealing itself in unrest and uneasiness. It warrants deep investigation surfacing deleterious effects and reduces academic achievement, whereas it would normally manifest itself moderately.

While studies on foreign language speaking anxiety reveal many reasons for it, one of the main reasons is that it is caused by the person himself/herself. The individual's self-evaluation skills and their impact on perceived competence. For example, "test anxiety" may cause a person to compare himself/herself with his/her peers, leading to a feeling of inadequacy. In this vein, another study indicated that not only would test anxiety affect test performance, but worse test performance would testify to the language learners' self-evaluation and self-confidence to increase anxiety further. Based on that, Tran (2011) delineates distinct types of FLA, constituting text anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and

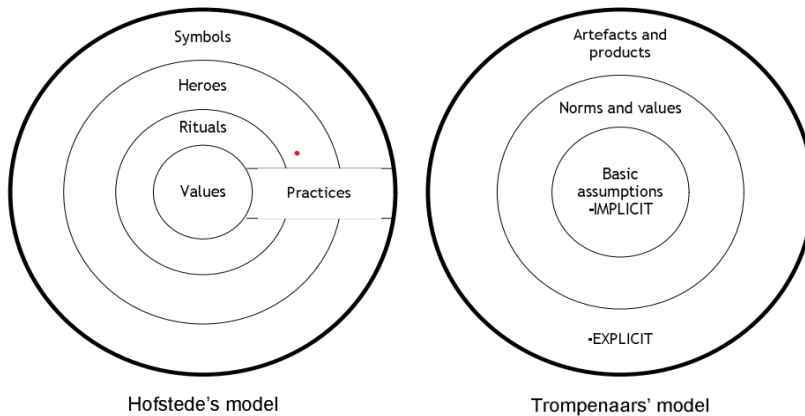
communication apprehension (p.7). The most common problem among the aforementioned concepts is “test anxiety,” which can be approached in a different way than the other two. According to Chambers et al, (2004), test anxiety is conceptualized as a trait; a characteristic along which persons vary to explain individual differences in emotionality and worry.

FLA is closely associated with communication anxiety and the fear of receiving a poor assessment. Concurrently, emphasizing the vital need for a thorough examination of students’ language proficiency in relation to their success or failure in language acquisition is another side of the coin. Horwitz (2001) accentuates the pivotal role of learners’ expectations in learning a foreign language. Persisting over the years, she investigated the cognisant of language learning experience and heightened effective factors of it.

Foreign Language Speaking anxiety (FLSA) is more likely to occur in formal educational settings than in naturalistic contexts (Aksoy, 2020). Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) noted that students perceive language learning as challenging, leading to hesitant speaking behaviors. Factors affecting language acquisition include beliefs, facilitators, motivation, and opportunities for engagement (Horwitz et al., 1986). Kaya (1995) studied the relationship between self-confidence, anxiety, and motivation in language learners. Woodrow (2006) investigated the interplay between speaking anxiety and performance, suggesting that anxiety significantly impairs performance. Tsipladikes (2009) offered practical suggestions for addressing speaking *difficulties*.

## 1.2 Culture

Culture, a vast and varied notion, significantly shapes human behavior, ideas, values, and social standards. It encompasses language, art, music, literature, religious rituals, and social structures. Culture exists beyond specific groups and can be understood as a system of ideas passed down through generations, represented symbolically. Geertz (2009) defined culture as a system of meanings historically transmitted and expressed through symbols, facilitating the communication and development of knowledge and views about life. Moreover, culture is seen as dynamic and responsive to societal shifts (Jones and Alony, 2007). It is therefore a factor in the transformation of living or non-living societal aspects. The development of character and construction processes is closely influenced by culture (Craig & Douglas, 2006). In this vein, the dynamic nature of culture is represented by Hofstede (1997) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), where the former describes culture’s core elements as values and practices, while the latter emphasizes the significance of culture’s explicit characteristics.



**Figure 1** *Layers of Culture (Hofstede, 1997; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997)*

Figure 1 reveals that the outer layer consists of observable expressions formed by the inner core. Hofstede's model indicates that rituals reflect ceremonies within a culture, whereas heroes reflect prominent figures within that culture (p. 9). Members of the same culture can identify these subtle hints. Trompenaars (1997) describes basic assumptions in the core layer, which shape inadvertent actions and beliefs instilled from birth (p. 23). Understanding Hofstede's model is important in the context of EFL contexts because it is important in guiding learners to adapt and change their language learning mechanisms when exposed to different cultures. It has a role-playing factor in educational experiences. To enhance these educational experiences through cultural exposure, a systemic and reflective approach should be adopted. Integrating diverse cultures into curricula raises awareness and enhances resilience toward cultural diversities (Sleeter, 2018). These cultural layers and unfamiliar cultural norms can heighten Foreign language speaking anxiety without intervention, for example direct communication patterns or the opposite norms in one's home culture can trigger anxiety by making people feel unprepared. As FLSA is not solely an internal phenomenon, but also deeply influenced by external cultural dynamics, understanding the cultural underpinnings of anxiety is essential. If it provides a solution to this, in some countries, cultural immersion programs address students' adjustment challenges, increasing their cultural understanding. Students experiencing multicultural environments can develop perspectives through teamwork. Incorporating diverse cultures promotes a vibrant learning atmosphere and supports the evolution of educational systems that embrace varied cultural backgrounds, fostering knowledgeable and compassionate individuals. Within this regard, the integration of culture through language use in classrooms and language teaching could be facilitated in many ways. In this way, students' awareness of the target culture increases and their understanding of the values and society within the culture raises (Altay, İ, F, 2005).

### 1.3 Intercultural Education

Interculturality involves individuals entering a new cultural field, bringing their own unquestioned reference frameworks (Bolten, 2015a). It signifies the absence of a shared identity, highlighting confrontations with cross-cultural settings where communicators adopt cultural orientations. Bolten (2012) contrasts structure-oriented and process-oriented perspectives on culture.

To enrich academic experiences through cultural exposure, a systemic and reflective approach should be adopted. Integrating diverse cultures into curricula raises cultural awareness and enhances resilience. Cultural immersion programs help students adjust and increase cultural understanding. Students in multicultural environments develop insights into different cultures through teamwork. Incorporating diverse cultures promotes a vibrant learning atmosphere and emphasizes the importance of cultural backgrounds in fostering knowledgeable, compassionate individuals.

### 1.4 Intercultural Competence

Interculturalism concepts have been explored by several scholars (Levey, 2012; Palaiologou, 2012; Wieviorka, 2012). Language teachers should internalize intercultural competence. Meyers (1991, as cited in Yüzlü, 2024) defines “intercultural competence” as the ability to behave adequately when interacting with representatives of foreign cultures. Lasonen & Teräs (2012) define “intercultural” as the relationships involving cultural interactions, while “intercultural competence” refers to the ability to manage tasks in various contexts (Salo-Lee, 2006; Lahdenperä & Pia Sandevärn, 2016). In the following, it detailed how these competencies can be adapted to methodological applications, and their relationship with the FLSA in detail was investigated.

Teachers must apply three competencies in their methodology: cognitive competence, affective competence, and pedagogical components. Cognitive competency enables educators to understand and assess cultures, recognizing their own cultural biases. Affective competence involves positive attitudes toward various cultures, enhancing teachers’ mentoring abilities. Pedagogical competence relates to integrating multicultural activities into teaching practices (Meyers, 1991). Cognitive competence encompasses awareness of someone's own cultural biases as well as knowledge of other cultures, both of which are essential to identifying and responding to FLSA. Affective competence is also important for reducing anxiety; it involves positive attitudes toward cultural diversity (Salo-Lee, 2006). Showing respect for and interest in diverse cultural backgrounds, educators are able to create the atmosphere where students feel more comfortable making mistakes and practicing speaking without fear of judgment. In tandem with this, pedagogical competence carries an equal importance because it includes the use of multicultural content with activities enhancing intercultural competence Salo-Lee (2006), This is indeed important for the students since the exposure to a different culture establishes self-confidence and adaptability in communicative life.

### *1.5 Exchange Programs*

Research on optimal learning and exposure to the target language has increased with more universities offering exchange programs (Köylü, 2016; Martin-Rubió & Cots, 2018; Pérez-Vidal & Llanes, 2021). Most studies focus on Anglophone countries, yet funding for exchange programs in EU member states has expanded their influence. Programs like ERASMUS allow students to immerse in English as a lingua franca. Research highlights the role of English as a lingua franca in study abroad (ELFSA) settings (Köylü, 2016). ELFSA promotes positive changes in learners' perspectives about studying abroad and learning English (Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014). Additionally, thorough research on traditional study abroad programs and at-home English education is essential (Köylü, 2021). In a similar vein, Freed's (1995) compilation *Second Language Acquisition in a Study Abroad Context* examines individual and group differences in linguistic development during study abroad, focusing on communication strategies, fluency, and lexical and grammatical development (Wang, 2009). Alongside this, enhanced fluency improves learners' self-awareness, often leading them to feel more competent and lessen their anxiety when interacting. This relationship indicates that linguistic attainment is not only conducive to language proficiency but also plays a critical role in reducing anxiety about language use. Additionally, these experiences can positively influence English-speaking anxiety among EFL learners (Lee & Song, 2019). However, exposure to different cultural contexts can be crippling, with institutions often unable to fully alleviate the symptoms of culture shock. It is typical to experience both culture shock and language shock simultaneously, with the latter induced by immersion in a setting where the prevalent language is not the participants' native language (Brown, 2008, p. 77).

Numerous studies have revealed indicators of the advantages of studying abroad via exchange programs. One advantage is increased fluency in the second language due to extended time overseas. Carroll (1967), in one of the earliest studies, discovered that students in American colleges specializing in French, German, and Russian showed significant improvement. Later, Llanes & Muñoz (2013) found that study abroad students showed higher fluency gains compared to at-home contexts. Miller and Ginsberg (1995) and Brecht and Robinson (1995) provided insights into student perspectives on study abroad through student journals and narratives. In parallel with this, Smith (2018) indicated that exposure in an English-speaking setting significantly raised confidence and improved English fluency after participating in a global exchange program. In these environments, students experience rich extracurricular activities and multilingual exposure, fostering dynamic interactions between English as L1 and L2. In this vein, sojourners navigate various activities, highlighting the complexities of language acquisition in intercultural settings (Taguchi, 2015).

### *1.6 Language Learning for Exchanges*

The number of participants in EU exchange programs has increased as students seek to learn or enhance their language skills. A clear link exists between studying abroad and language awareness (Borghetti and Beaven, 2015). Smith (1995) discussed "discursive awareness" regarding language usage. However, individual factors like perception (Van de Meerendonk et al., 2009) and motivation (Dörnyei, 1998; 2021) affect language learning

outcomes (Marijuan & Sanz, 2018). Establishing multicultural environments benefits language instruction by lowering anxiety levels. Multilingual learners thrive in exchange programs (Mitchell, 2021).

### 1.7 Erasmus+

Burns (2005) investigated the intercultural experiences of students in Erasmus programmes. Lantolf & Thorne (2006) stated that language acquisition stimulates reconceptualisation and improves social cognition. He then underlined that speaking facilitates thinking and encourages the internalisation of effective language use. This approach emphasises the importance of flexibility and communication skills in the 21st century Erasmus+ context.

Research indicates that FLSA in study abroad contexts is a significant area of interest. FLSA, or fear of speaking a foreign language, can negatively impact communication and learning outcomes. Factors influencing FLSA include socio-cultural interactions, contact with native speakers, and individual proficiency. As one of the most important factors that can prevent this, whether studying in the host country through the ERASMUS+ exchange program can contribute to the formation of self-consciousness among students by reducing the anxiety caused by culture shock and language barriers have been emerged as the starting point of this study. In this context, the following research questions.

Research Questions:

1. What factors contribute to the success or failure of international exchange programs in reducing English-speaking anxiety among Spanish and Turkish EFL students?
2. How can international exchange programs be improved to better address the needs of Spanish and Turkish EFL students with high levels of English-speaking anxiety?

## 2. Method

In the present study, the qualitative research design, as defined by Tashakkori and Creswell (2007, p. 4), involves a comprehensive approach when the researcher collects and analyzes data utilizing qualitative methodologies within a single study. This approach focuses on the depth of qualitative data collection and analysis through interviews, aiming to provide rich, descriptive insights into participants' experiences. By engaging in this qualitative method, we expected to explore the nuances of English-speaking anxiety and the factors influencing it, allowing for a deeper interpretation of the results. This research design enriched the research process by providing a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of complex phenomena and enhancing the overall quality of research outcomes.

### 2.1. Research Population and Sample/Study Group/Participants

The participants of this study are third-grade university students from English departments (EFL) at six universities, three in Turkey and three in Spain. Particularly, semi-structured interviews and participant observations during the exchange program provided real-time insights into students' interactions and language use in a multilingual

environment. In this way, this qualitative approach ensures a thorough examination of the phenomenon, enriching the understanding of the various elements contributing to the development or reduction of speaking anxiety in an international context.

### 2.2. *Participant characteristics*

A total of 10 students from the third grade of two institutions, three in Turkey and three in Spain, were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. To ensure that different cultural perspectives are fairly represented in the study, the participants were split equally between Turkish and Spanish students.

### 2.3. *Data Analysis*

Semi-structured interviews were used in this qualitative study for gathering data. These interviews allow for flexible questioning while consistently keeping the research goals in mind (Kvale, 1996). Questions were aimed to pertain to how participants' participation in an international exchange program has affected their experiences, perceptions, and feelings about speaking anxiety in English as a foreign language.

Furthermore, it reveals the effect of participating in the exchange program and identifies any changes or shifts in participants' anxiety levels when speaking English before and after the program. Additionally, we aim to explore specific situations or encounters that contributed to your English-speaking anxiety during the exchange program and how you coped with these challenges. We also seek to examine the impact of interactions with native speakers or other international students on your confidence and willingness to speak English. Furthermore, we assessed the effectiveness of language learning activities or programs targeting English-speaking skills during your experience abroad and investigated how cultural and social aspects of the host country influenced your English-speaking anxiety, including the role of cultural differences and language barriers.

A structured interview guide outlining key areas of inquiry and core questions was developed to ensure consistency across interviews. This clarification is aimed at serving as a guide for the interviews, ensuring that relevant topics are explored consistently across all participants. The questions were designed to capture participants' thoughts on their anxiety levels before and after the exchange program, factors contributing to their anxiety, any improvements they have noticed in their language abilities and confidence, along with the coping techniques they have used.

With the participants' permission, they were briefly informed about ethical considerations, consent and confidentiality to enhance their rights, this helped prove, considering the sensitivity of the topic, that participants were fully aware and comfortable sharing their personal experiences. The interviews were audio recorded. Detailed field notes were also gathered throughout the interviews to document nonverbal cues and contextual information. The recorded interviews were then fully transcribed, guaranteeing



the validity of the qualitative data. The interview questions and categorized headings are given below in Table 1.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Questions for EFL Students

CATEGORIES	QUESTIONS
<b>Prior Experience with English</b>	1. Have you had any experience or exposure to the English language before participating in the exchange program? If yes, please elaborate on the extent of your English language proficiency.
<b>Impact of the Exchange Program on Anxiety</b>	2. How did participating in the international exchange program affect your English-speaking anxiety? Did you experience any changes or shifts in your anxiety level when speaking English before and after the program?
<b>Specific Situations and Coping Strategies</b>	3. Can you share specific situations or encounters that contributed to your English-speaking anxiety during the exchange program? How did you cope with these situations?
<b>Interactions with Native Speakers and International Students</b>	4. Did interaction with native speakers or other international students during the exchange program affect your English speaking anxiety? How did these interactions affect your confidence and willingness to speak English?
<b>Language Learning Activities</b>	5. Did you participate in language learning activities or programs targeting English speaking skills during your experience abroad? Please describe these activities and their impact on your English-speaking anxiety.
<b>Cultural and Social Influences</b>	6. How did the cultural and social aspects of the host country affect your English-speaking anxiety? Did cultural differences or language barriers contribute to any feelings of anxiety or self-consciousness when speaking English?
<b>Support and Guidance</b>	7. Did you receive any support or guidance from teachers, program coordinators, or other students during the exchange program to help you overcome your English-speaking anxiety?
<b>Factors Reducing English-Speaking Anxiety</b>	8. What are the main factors that can contribute to reducing English-speaking anxiety among EFL students participating in international exchange programs?
<b>Advice for Future EFL Exchange Students</b>	9. Based on your personal experiences, what advice would you give to future EFL students planning to participate in similar international exchange programs to manage or minimize their English-speaking anxiety?

#### 2.4. *Data Analysis*

In order to examine changes in speaking anxiety levels before and after participation in an exchange program, semi-structured interviews with 10 third-grade students from Turkish and Spanish universities were conducted as part of the qualitative data gathering process for this study. Semi-structured interviewing enabled comprehensive, contextually relevant data and an in-depth analysis of the statements. In the analysis part, transcribed interviews were thoroughly evaluated, coded, and categorized within the framework of a thematic approach to data analysis in order to find repeated themes and patterns concerning speaking anxiety levels before and after the exchange program via Nvivo software by Lumivero. With this, it was helpful to derive deeper insights from our data. This analysis gave a thorough knowledge of the participants' opinions and experiences, offering light on how language anxiety is affected by international exchange programs. In order to strengthen the trustworthiness of findings and verify data reliability, inter-coder reliability and peer review process during the coding were ensured with the help of two professionals specialized in EL (English Language Teaching) and ELL (English Language Literature).

Hacettepe University Ethics Commission's ethical approval was obtained prior to the start of data collection. This approval guarantees that the study abides by ethical standards and protects the participants' rights and privacy. All study participants received official consent forms, which were distributed in accordance with ethical standards. So, the participants had the right to withdraw at any point and it was definitely stated that all data were anonymized.

If interventions or experimental manipulations were used in the study, describe their specific content. Include the details of the interventions or manipulations intended for each study condition, including control groups (if any), and describe how and when interventions (experimental manipulations) were actually administered.

The description of manipulations or interventions should include several elements. Carefully describe the content of the intervention or specific experimental manipulations. Often, this will involve presenting a brief summary of instructions given to participants. If the instructions are unusual or compose the experimental manipulation, you may present them verbatim in an appendix or in an online supplemental archive. If the text is brief, you may present it in the body of the paper if it does not interfere with the readability of the report.

### 3. Results

In the Results section, summarize the collected data and the analysis performed on those data relevant to the discourse that is to follow. Report the data in sufficient detail to justify your conclusions. Mention all relevant results, including those that run counter to expectation; be sure to include small effect sizes (or statistically nonsignificant findings) when theory predicts large (or statistically significant) ones. Do not hide uncomfortable results by omission. Do not include individual scores or raw data with the exception, for example, of single-case designs or illustrative examples. In the spirit of data sharing

(encouraged by APA and other professional associations and sometimes required by funding agencies), raw data, including study characteristics and individual effect sizes used in a meta-analysis, can be made available on supplemental online archives. Discussing the implications of the results should be reserved for presentation in the Discussion section.

### 3.1. Factors Influencing English-Speaking Anxiety

The findings of the present study present various aspects influencing the English-speaking anxiety of Spanish and Turkish EFL students participating in international exchange programs. Factors vary from previous experiences with the English language to challenges and support systems faced or provided, respectively, during the period of the program. The following sections explain these factors in detail, starting with the previous exposure to the English language among participants.

#### 3.1.1. Int Q1. Have you had any experience or exposure to the English language before participating in the exchange program?

In an attempt to identify the previous experience or exposure of the participants to the English language before participating in the exchange program,

Table 2. Previous Experience with the language

Category	Code	f
Previous Experiences	Previous Experience with the Language	12
	Anxiety Reduction through Realization	4
	Participating Language class in high school	2
	Participating in language course	2
	Language Awareness	2

When the codes are evaluated under the Previous experience category, previous experience (f=12), anxiety reduction through realization, participating language class in high school (f=3) participating in language course, and language awareness (f=2) are the most frequently mentioned points. The most frequently mentioned code was previous exposure to the language (f=12), while the least frequently mentioned was language awareness (f=2).

*Since it's English language teaching, it's considered preparatory education. Even though it was a short period before, I understood the difference better after coming here in terms of everyday language use. Academically, we were quite good, and to some extent, we were proficient in daily life. However, since we were constantly*

*speaking here, we focused on improving our language skills. (P2, previous experience).*

*3.1.2. Int. Q2. How did participating in the international exchange program affect your English-speaking anxiety? Did you experience any changes or shifts in your anxiety level when speaking English before and after the program?*

The interviewees were directed to the second interview question of whether participating in the international exchange program affects their English-speaking anxiety. In Table 3 below, the most frequent answers given by these participants in their answers to this question are indicated under codes and these are generally grouped under themes.

Table 3. Exchange Program Experience regarding English Speaking Anxiety

Themes	Codes	<i>f</i>
<b>Language Development</b>	Language Development Thanks to Exchange Program	4
	Development of natural communication skills	2
<b>Educational Factors</b>	Positive Impact of Teacher Corrections	6
	Comfort and Confidence in speaking English	5
<b>Program Experience</b>	Post-Erasmus confidence continuation	2
<b>Psychological Factors</b>	English speaking anxiety	10
	Self-confidence in Language Learning	5
	Self-motivation and Reduction of Anxiety	4
	No experience with anxiety during speaking	2
<b>Social Factors</b>	Positive Feedback and Understanding reduce Anxiety	5
	Positive Impact of Feedback on Reducing Anxiety	4

In order to deeply analyze whether the participants' participation in the exchange program had any effect on their English speaking anxiety or whether there was any change in their level of English speaking anxiety, the second interview question of the study was formulated, and when the second interview question about the effect of the exchange

program on English speaking anxiety was asked to the participants, themes emerged when the most frequently used codes were categorized. The five themes that emerged are as follows: The codes are compiled under the theme of language development as language development thanks to the exchange program and the development of natural communication skills (f=2).

*I can say this; again, I will give an example from daily language: in Turkey, yes, we gossip and so on, but we don't have much opportunity to use English actively, but here, because we are constantly and compulsorily speaking English, my anxiety inevitably decreased, as a speaking anxiety because in Turkey we make presentations in classes, we progress academically, but apart from that, we cannot adapt English to our daily life in some way, but here, because we are making progress both daily and academically, I realized that my anxiety has decreased because we are making progress. (P7, Language Development Thanks to Exchange Program)*

Besides, positive impacts of teacher corrections (f= 6), comfort, and confidence in speaking English (f= 5) are given place under the theme of educational factors effecting English-speaking anxiety of participants participating in the international exchange program.

The other noticeable code was the Post-Erasmus confidence continuation (f=2), which forms the theme of program experience. As underlined by the participants who stated that the Erasmus exchange program has really changed the level of conversation at a very positive level and that this effect has continued after participation.

Considering the aspect of anxiety related to psychology, this question, which aims to reveal the psychological and visible effects of anxiety in a way, has the following codes: English speaking anxiety (f=10) was the most recurrent code, followed by self-confidence in language learning (f=5), self-motivation and reduction of anxiety (f=4), which has a positive attitude compared to the other recurring codes, and finally the least recurring no experience with anxiety during speaking (f=2), which these elements are unified by the overarching theme of psychological factors.

*Because I had some concerns about whether they could speak English or whether I would be enough for them. I experienced stuttering and pauses while speaking, often getting stuck on a word and trying to find its English equivalent in my mind, which caused these pauses. (P6, English Speaking Anxiety)*

*I can express myself easily now. I didn't have any problems with grammar or vocabulary, but there was a shyness for some reason. I think I broke that too... Before I left, I usually gave very short answers. For example, I was shyly avoiding the questions asked in a short way. After I returned, I was avoiding the questions. I can express myself now. There is no shyness. The change has been in this direction. I used to give short answers. Now I speak normally in English, just like I speak in Turkish, I express myself. (TP4, self-confidence in language learning)*

When the follow-up question delving into the positive or negative shifts, participants touched upon more concrete items of the social factors theme, including positive feedback and understanding reduces anxiety (f=5) and the positive effect of feedback in reducing anxiety (f=4) constitute the most frequently mentioned codes under the previously mentioned related theme.

*I can say that your presentation was not bad; your presentation was very good, but even just the comment "you said this wrong" actually caused me to progress a little bit positively. In other words, getting positive reactions in terms of feedback was effective in this. (P2, positive feedback and understanding reduce anxiety.)*

This excerpt demonstrates that students emphasized the effect of an explanatory, concrete explanation and verbal reinforcement, rather than direct negative feedback, in creating a positive attitude, reducing anxiety, and increasing confidence.

*3.1.3. Int. Q3. Can you share specific situations or encounters that contributed to your English-speaking anxiety during the exchange program? How did you cope with these situations?*

The third interview question was intended to determine specific situations participants encountered during the exchange program that contributed to their FLSA, and, as a result, how they did cope with these situations.

Table 4. Anxiety-Inducing Situations and Coping Strategies

Themes	Codes	Excerpts
Sources of English-Speaking Anxiety	Anxiety Due to Perceived Lack of Preparation	<p>SP5: I didn't feel ready for the presentation; I didn't want to read from the paper at the time of the presentation because it was not a presentation. I read from the paper and I wanted to speak myself, then I forgot some things; I forgot the details about the presentation. And at that moment I panicked. Then I said to myself, "I believe it will be good." I motivated myself and came back again, but at first I had speaking anxiety because I didn't feel ready at first. I was ready, but I felt a state of not feeling ready. I don't know; I recovered afterwards, but at first I felt bad because I had a feeling like, No, it won't happen.</p>
	Peer and Cultural Pressure Leading to Fear of Making Mistakes	<p>SP4: Most of my friends in my class are shy and timid when speaking English and even give up after making a mistake. They do not want to make mistakes, and when they make mistakes, they give up because they cannot explain it to a certain place.</p> <p>TP2. Culturally, I can say that our culture has a social impact because there is such a situation throughout the people. As the Turkish nation, we have a very high level of judgement of others. I interpret this as follows: I think that when they make a mistake, they cover this mistake by emphasizing someone else's mistake more.</p>
Coping Mechanisms for Reducing Anxiety	Person's Positive Mindset Toward Mistakes	<p>TP3. When I first came, I thought I shouldn't make the wrong sentence, blah, then I said there is no need; I mean, you will get along anyway, never mind; even if it is wrong, look at learning, and so I said focus on it, so it continued like that, so it helped you to reduce this because you were learning-orientated.</p> <p>SP2: Whether I was talking to the lecturers in the exchange program or talking to other foreign students, I can say that I only gave myself to English. I talked all the time; I asked questions without hesitation.</p>
	Reducing Anxiety through Observing Acceptance and Patience	<p>TP1. I should be criticized for not understanding the lessons and getting lower grades in the previous exam. I could have gotten higher grades, but I did not study well in my lessons. Also, I have difficulty understanding the lessons or speeches of the teachers.</p>
		<p>TP1: I asked questions such as what I can do in this country or what you have done in the countries you have travelled to; can you give me advice if you tell me? Here I tried to communicate with people by trying to chat. In this way, I think</p>

	<b>Interaction for Necessities Reduces Anxiety</b>	<i>I improved myself a little more. Staying in contact in daily life made me feel safer.</i>  <i>TP4: When I went there, I had to talk to people in order to fulfil my own needs, whether I needed to go to the market or to ask for a place. Therefore, I had to overcome this anxiety. In this job, I communicated with people to solve problems such as asking for a place to meet my needs, asking for a place to buy something in the market, and asking for a price. And I can say that I got rid of these anxieties. Making conversations for their daily needs made me less anxious.</i>
	<b>Indirect Impact of Social Activities and Feedback</b>	<i>P10. I do not have time to think about my classes. I just participate in the lessons. I do not know whether I pass or not.</i>
<b>Indirect Factors Affecting Anxiety</b>	<b>No Experience with Anxiety During Speaking</b>	<i>P14. As usual, I had difficulty listening. Some grammar contents made me worried. I do not think that something will change from now on. I try to study for the exam, but I cannot.</i>

*SP\*: Spanish Participant*

*TP\*: Turkish Participant*

As can be seen in Table 4, the opinions of the participants are given as excerpts and examples under the most frequently recurrent codes. It is aimed at investigating the factors affecting FLSA by arriving at themes from these codes. These factors were analyzed under 3 themes: sources of English-speaking anxiety, coping mechanisms for reducing anxiety, and indirect factors affecting Anxiety. The codes under these themes were derived from the participants' interview question responses. The participants generally stated that their "Sources of English-Speaking Anxiety" stemmed from perceived lack of preparation and peer-cultural pressure leading to fear of making mistakes. On the contrary, as seen in the excerpts from both Spanish and Turkish participants, Person's Positive Mindset Toward Mistakes, Reducing Anxiety through Observing Acceptance and Patience, and Interaction for Necessities Reduces Anxiety were seen as examples of positive contributions and were given as subcategories of the Coping Mechanisms for Reducing Anxiety theme.

When the Sources of Anxiety Theme analyzed, 'anxiety due to the perceived lack of preparation' and 'peer and cultural pressure leading to fear of making mistakes' are mostly coded. SP5 initially felt unprepared, which heightened speaking anxiety. In this sense, the participant doubts his/her ability. Internally, he/she attempts to regain composure by self-encouragement. In the code of 'peer and cultural pressures on the fear of making mistakes', the most frequently mentioned aspect was the impact of peer pressure on English-speaking anxiety.



Here in the ‘Interaction for Necessities Reduces Anxiety’ code, Turkish participants reported feeling more anxious and stressed when they had to act according to their needs, when they had to use English to fulfil their daily needs, and when they had to use English as Lingua Franca when they were native speakers of English or did not speak the language of the country of exchange. Strangely, Spanish participants did not answer this question in relation to anxiety when they had to use English for their daily needs.

*3.1.4. Int. Q4. Did interacting with native speakers or other international students during the exchange program affect your English-speaking anxiety? How did these interactions affect your confidence and willingness to speak English?*

When participants were addressed, the question of interacting with native speakers or other international students during the exchange program affected their English-speaking anxiety, and these interactions influenced their confidence and willingness to speak English. As can be seen in the table below, there are two types of themes. These themes are divided into two as social and cultural factors, and some codes have emerged under these themes. These codes are interaction with native speakers (n=5), social detachment, and ethnic segregation. (n=4), the positive influence of cultural attitudes towards language learning (n=2) were the most repeated codes.

Table 5. Impact of Interactions on English Speaking Anxiety and Confidence

Themes	Codes	<i>f</i>
Social Factors	Interaction with Native Speakers	5
Social Factors	Social Detachment and Ethnic Segregation	4
Cultural Factors	Positive Influence of Cultural Attitudes towards Language Learning	2

*As I mentioned before, I used English to interact with them. For example, thanks to them, I learnt which market is cheaper or what places to visit. (SP4, Interaction with Native Speakers)*

This sentence describes interaction with local Polish people, reflecting the challenges of engaging with native speakers in everyday situations like shopping.

*When I first arrived, I struggled a lot, especially in the market, because even though middle-aged and older people might know English, they didn't want to speak it. This has something to do with their nationalism. As I kept saying I didn't know Polish, I*

*encountered people who shouted at me in Polish. (SP3, Social Detachment and Ethnic Segregation)*

These statements reflect social detachment and ethnic segregation, as the participant experiences difficulties communicating with locals due to cultural and nationalistic barriers.

*When I realized I was getting ahead in terms of the words I used and my confidence, I became even more confident and started speaking better. (SP2, Positive Influence of Cultural Attitudes towards Language Learning)*

This reflects how engaging with the cultural and educational context of the Erasmus program positively influenced the participant's confidence and language skills, aligning with the Positive Influence of Cultural Attitudes towards Language Learning. This part suggests that, although there was initial difficulty, the participant eventually adapted to the cultural and language challenges, showing a positive influence.

*3.1.5. Int. Q5. Did you participate in language learning activities or programs targeting English-speaking skills during your experience abroad? Please describe these activities and their impact on your English-speaking anxiety.*

The fifth interview question was intended to determine whether participating in any language learning activities or programs regarding targeting enhancing English speaking skills during the exchange impacted the English speaking anxiety of participants.

*I wanted to improve my English, and I thought it would be better for me after the exam. After the university exam. To adapt to university life, preparation was good for me in every respect. (TP3, university education toward language)*

*3.1.6. Int. Q6. How did the cultural and social aspects of the host country affect your English-speaking anxiety? Did cultural differences or language barriers contribute to any feelings of anxiety or self-consciousness when speaking English?*

When the participants were asked to examine how the cultural and social aspects of the host country affect their anxiety about speaking English and the impact of cultural

differences or language barriers on their anxiety or self-consciousness when speaking English, the most frequently mentioned statements by Spanish and Turkish participants are listed in the table below according to themes, codes, and frequency of expression and are also given as excerpt examples below the table 6.

Table 6. Impact of the Host Country’s Culture and Social Aspects on English-Speaking Anxiety

Dimension	Theme	Code
Psychological Factors	Management of Speaking Anxiety	Personal Narratives
	Coping Mechanisms	Adaptive Strategies
	Confidence Enhancement	Self-Efficacy
Social Factors	Interpersonal Engagement	Active Interaction
	Social Integration	Communal Involvement
Cultural Factors	Cultural Awareness	Cross-Cultural Insight
	Reflective Insights	Self-Reflection

*I believe it was beneficial for both cultural and linguistic development. We spoke to a substantial audience—almost 200 people. The important thing was how well I could express myself there. (SP3)*

Here the Spanish participant points out management of her/his speaking anxiety in front of substantial audiences. She states that being able to express herself in the target language in front of so many people play an important role in “management of her speaking anxiety.” He/she also mentions that this contributes to her cultural and linguistic development.

*As I said before, I used English to interact with them. For example, thanks to them, I learnt which supermarket is cheaper or what there are to visit. Or I used English to learn words from their language. I learnt how to make sentences; things like that happened. (SP2)*

3.1.7. *Int. Q7. Did you receive any support or guidance from teachers, program coordinators, or other students during the exchange program to help you overcome your English-speaking anxiety?*

The interviewees were directed to the question of whether they received any support or guidance from teachers, program coordinators, or other students during the exchange program to help them overcome their English-speaking anxiety. In the following

Themes	Codes	<i>f</i>
Self-reliance and independence	Lack of need for support	7
Institutional support	Coordinators' assistance	6
Personal growth and cultural exposure	Exchange program's impact	5
Student initiative	Responsibility on students	5
Feedback and error correction	Teacher correction	4
Language barriers	Accent difficulties	3
Cultural differences	Cultural adaptation	3
Social engagement and isolation	Social interaction challenges	3
Language diversity	Multilingual environment	3
Academic and social support	Teacher and peer support	2
	Institutional guidance and adaptation	2
Cultural characteristics	Reserved social culture	1

table, the most frequently given answers were compiled into codes, and from these codes, a table was formed by reaching general themes. Under the table, excerpts and explanations of the Turkish and Spanish participants are given in detail.

Table 7. Support and Guidance for Overcoming English-Speaking Anxiety During Exchange

*I didn't really feel the need for additional support from teachers or coordinators, but they were always helpful when we had questions. Institutional exchange coordinators were always ready to help. They answered any questions immediately. (TP3, Coordinators' assistance)*

*I felt like it was more up to the students, which is why I didn't feel the need for extra support. (TP1)*

*There were some accent differences, like some teachers had a Russian accent, which made it difficult to understand sometimes. But in time, I got used to it. For instance,*

*as you know, there are method courses in English language teaching. While doing this, we used some wrong words. They usually corrected this. (SP5)*

Several responses are made clear by the qualitative analysis of the responses to the query about the guidance as well as guidance received during the exchange program. A sizable fraction of participants (n=7) emphasized their independence and self-reliance, saying they did not feel dependent on outside assistance. However, a large number of students valued the institutional support offered, especially the coordinators' help (n = 6). The program's impact on exposure to different cultures and personal development were also regularly highlighted, and participants acknowledged its significant significance (n=5). Furthermore, some students highlighted the value of student initiative and responsibility.

Additionally, several participants emphasized the importance of feedback and error correction, mentioning in particular the corrective instruction given by teachers (n=4).

*The most unusual thing about Latvian culture was how they would swim in cold water, even when it was freezing outside. It was difficult to communicate with Latvians; they were very reserved, and we had to make an effort to form friendships. Young people in Latvia spoke good English, but older people didn't speak English at all. Most people in Latvia spoke three languages: Russian, Latvian, and English. Latvian students frequently participated in exchange programs, which gave them an advantage in terms of cultural exposure and language skills. "Latvians were quite reserved, making it challenging to form friendships, but they had strong English skills."(SP3, Cultural Differences)*

Still, problems with social interaction and isolation (n=3), cultural differences, and the need for cultural adaptation (n=3), and linguistic barriers spurred on by accent variations (n=3) were frequently mentioned as impediments. A few respondents also emphasized the influence of a multilingual setting, which sometimes made language use more difficult (n=3). Fewer participants mentioned institutional assistance in adjusting to their new environment (n=2), as well as academic and social support from peers and instructors. Consequently, an individual (n=1) pointed out cultural factors as a factor

affecting their interactions, specifically the guarded social culture they met. When taken as a whole, these answers show the wide variety of experiences with support during the exchange program.

In the same question above, which reveals that the Spanish and Turkish participants made a cultural evaluation while they were in the Erasmus exchange program in the same city, it is seen that both the Spanish and Turkish participants emphasized that the young people who spoke the foreign language there were successful in learning English. On the other hand, as a common comment of both groups of participants, it is stated that the people here are described as cold-blooded individuals and that this process did not develop as fast as they expected when making friends.

#### *2.1.7.1 Improving International Exchange Programs to Meet the Needs of Spanish and Turkish EFL Students with English-Speaking Anxiety*

##### *2.7.1.2 The Role of Support and Guidance in Reducing Anxiety.*

The analysis derived from the qualitative findings from Interview Questions 8 and 9 aims to explore the aspects in which students experience anxiety about speaking English while participating in international exchange programs. Hence, these responses provide valuable insights into the external support provided by teachers, coordinators, and other students who helped them cope with anxiety. In the following, the responses of the Spanish and Turkish participants to interview questions 8, and 9 were analyzed in detail, giving the most frequently mentioned points, themes, coding, and sample excerpts.

#### *3.1.8. Int. Q8. What are the main factors that can contribute to reducing English-speaking anxiety among EFL students participating in international exchange programs?*

##### *3.1.8.1. Self-motivation and Reduction of Anxiety.*

This section seeks to inquire about how self-motivation and anxiety-reduction strategies help EFL learners manage language-induced anxiety in a culturally unfamiliar setting. The responses that were obtained in response to the interviewees' questions are categorized and grouped under themes.

As put forward by Price (1991) anxiety is one of the most important factors affecting language learning, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) looked at the more specific dimension of speaking and emphasized that language learners may have anxiety about demonstrating their performance and asserted that limited grasp of a foreign language, i.e., lower language anxiety is associated with higher levels of anxiety regarding the skills (speaking, reading, listening etc.) acquired during the learning.

The themes identified in this study stipulate the factors that make language anxiety and development quite multifaceted. The dominant themes, Social Factors, Language Development, Cultural Factors, and Psychological Factors have been either positive or quite challenging in the participants' experiences. Under the theme of Social Factors, emergent was that Positive Feedback and understanding reduce anxiety; this reflects how friendly interactions alleviate anxiety. In contrast, the more negative social aspect is represented by peer and cultural pressure leading to fear of making mistakes: situations when judgment and pressure coming from peers and cultural expectations can enhance fear regarding the production of errors in language use. The effects of social interaction and classroom interaction in this study coincide with the findings of Mak (2011); the results of Mak's study show that there are factors that influence SFL and that factors such as fear of negative evaluation, feeling uneasy doing and speaking activities in class, negative self-evaluation, and low academic self-confidence are the most common causes of SFL among Chinese EFL learners. Going back even further, Krashen (1986) also stated that affective factors are caused by the fear of making mistakes, which in turn may be caused by the inability to achieve the goals set in the second language learning process.

The second most mentioned factor in the section of language development was reducing mother tongue usage and increasing exposure to English. This brings into focus how immersion in a language can prove helpful for increasing competence. Among the most cited factors under Psychological Factors are self-motivation and anxiety reduction, which further highlight internal drive and emotional comfort in constructing language confidence. The other category is Cultural Factors: Cultural Attitudes toward Language Learning, which shows how cultural backgrounds affect students in terms of approaching the learning of a foreign language, influencing motivation and flexibility in learning. These

findings suggest that while positive feedback and more exposure to English can lead to increased language growth and reduced anxiety, there might be some barriers linked to cultural and peer-group pressures. The complexity of this therefore demands that exchange programs not only support the social dynamics that would promote a non-threatening environment but also support an inclusive environment that nurtures confidence among language learners.

The remarks made by the Spanish participant highlight how important practical language use is for lowering speaking anxiety and boosting self-assurance while speaking English as a foreign language. Speaking English with non-native speakers seems to help people overcome their initial anxiety and become more comfortable communicating. This is in line with earlier studies (Skehan, 1996; Jong et. Al, 2013; Tsourakas, 2021) that indicate regular use of a common language can assist improve fluency and lessen linguistic anxiety even when native speakers are not involved. The participant's story also emphasizes cultural aspects, as they credit their Catalan heritage, which is renowned for its openness and sociability, for their ease of social integration.

Others' excerpts clarify how peer dynamics and culture play a dual role in language practice in exchange programmes. Although being around other Turkish students provides comfort and a sense of familiarity, it also encourages frequent use of the mother tongue at the expense of practicing English. On the other hand, cultural familiarity may at times reinforce confidence in the mother tongue, limiting expectations for language development. This phenomenon is consistent with the theme of Peer and Cultural Pressure Leading to Fear of Making Mistakes, as the participant's experience shows how reliance on a common language within social groups can inhibit immersion in the target language, even when English practice is the goal. The environment thus becomes both a 'challenge' for language development and a 'saviour' for social support.

The participation promotes a mentality change in which English is viewed as the primary language and stresses the value of reducing dependency on one's native language. The participant emphasizes how lowering native language interference might improve



language immersion and cognitive engagement with English by urging participants to “forget” their native language and think only in English.

The excerpt’s second section focuses on a culturally sensitive method of language learning. The participant touches on cultural attitudes towards language learning when they recommend that words be comprehended directly in English rather than being translated into Turkish. To promote a more intuitive and fluid comprehension of English, this viewpoint highlights the importance of thinking about English terms independently rather than mapping them onto Turkish equivalents.

These findings imply that practical immersion techniques and a cultural shift in language perception, where learners accept English as an independent system, may both be beneficial for successful language learning. This method backs up the idea that both more exposure to the target language and a cognitive shift away from translation-based comprehension are necessary for successful language acquisition.

The Spanish participant highlighted the benefits of constructive feedback under the Social component theme. Turkish participant underlined that while speaking English with foreigners as a common language during the exchange program was at first uncomfortable, he eventually became accustomed to it and experienced less anxiety. Simultaneously, the Turkish participant discussed the beneficial impact on anxiety reduction of usage of the mother tongue and increasing exposure to English during the exchange program.

*3.1.9. Int Q. 9. Based on your personal experiences, what advice would you give to future EFL students planning to participate in similar international exchange programs to manage or minimize their English-speaking anxiety*

In the ninth interview question, third-grade EFL students were invited to share their personal stories, opinions on speaking anxiety, development, and suggestions for future EFL students.

Three topics were used to group these responses: social, psychological, and educational variables. All of the responses to this question were examined under these themes. The information was categorized under themes that would benefit future EFL students, including how to study abroad for language immersion, building confidence, viewing errors

in a positive light, and establishing academic and social networks. The results of the current study corroborate the findings of Alnajjar (2024), Social support and self-directing of someone's own learning adventure played a role in Iranian EFL students' English course achievement. Following this, Brands (2013) and Zander & Hannover (2014) mentioned the effects of self-report and social learning environment, while Rose, McKinley and Baffoe-Djan (2019) found that EFL students' perceived EFL teacher support played an active role in their academic achievement in their study with Chinese senior high school students. This is in line with our study and supports the positive effect of academic and social networks on EFL students' overseas language immersion.

*Personal Development and Confidence Building.* What mostly mentioned, confidence enhancement and hence self-efficacy, is in parallel with the Turkish participant's comment that 'a person should trust himself/herself first'; as Lin (2023) found in his study that the internal and external factors that cause FLSA can be caused by language skill teaching such as peers pressure or pronunciation if it is an external factor, and that self-confidence and shyness are the main internal factors.

In this respect, in parallel with each other, the participants' responses indicated that it enabled them to develop an adaptive strategy together with the development of this self-efficacy mechanism. One of the supporting responses emphasized the importance of being adaptive by asking despite knowing something. In addition to this, coming up with inventive ways, and practicing the language in daily life were among the most common responses that someone was getting beyond the language learning barriers.

*Social Integration and Interpersonal Engagement.* As participants emphasized the value of active interaction, the Spanish participant's comment exemplifies how exchange students can overcome language and cultural barriers in a foreign language learning setting. In this response, he compares his own culture - which he finds quite active and friendly - with the Latvian culture, which he finds quite reserved but proactively devises in terms of language practice and management of language learning anxiety.

Overall, these recommendations are insightful and multifaceted ways of using methods to tackle learning obstacles. In this way blend of creativity, strategic networking, and self-

directed, communal dialogues also offer a resilient and resourceful advancement of meaningful language learning.

*Cultural and Environmental Adaptation.* The participants reflected on their cultural insights, one of the most frequently mentioned points of the participants is the insights into various cultures of cultural immersion emphasized by Ateşkan (2016) in his study. Also; Liddicoat & Scrino (2013) discuss that learning the target language and meaningfully interpreting the dynamic of the target language can be gained by living the culture immersively and creating insights. In parallel with these, Altay (2005) asserted that culture should be learned together with the language and that there are many methods (tapes, films, specifically student exchange) to integrate elements of the target culture into the classroom.

Participants in the study also handled the crucial role of exchange programs in providing the easiness to transition of the period. The participants stated that by interacting with different groups, they improved their cultural awareness, gained an open-minded outlook, and accelerated their adaptability process. For example, the Spanish participant stated that cultural diversity contributed to his/her becoming a global-minded person by developing his/her sense of empathy.

Furthermore, upon exploration of environmental adaptation, participants reported increased social integration by following local traditions, linking this to the usefulness of cultural immersion as a means of improving community relations. Overall, these themes underline the necessity of structured exchange programs, which include both cultural orientation and practical support. Rather, a framework like that would arm the student with ways to advance confidently into their host countries, so interlinking the idea that intercultural adaptability is a skill that can indeed be developed provided the right support systems are in place here. The insight implies that the exchange programs need to create experiences for students so that they can balance exposure with guidance for them to feel the personal growth brought about by cultural engagement and flexibility in the environment.

*Language Learning Challenges and Recommendations.* Regarding the last point on the related issue, taking advantage of this exchange program opportunity is a confirmation that a learner should unquestionably assess. The participant shared his/her thoughts on exchange programs, stating that this immersed experience is one of the significant advantages of the exchange programs.

As a finding of the present study, the participant suggested that more emphasis should be placed on listening and speaking rather than formal instruction, indicating a view that language acquisition is most effective through active, practical engagement (Basaran & Cabaroglu, 2014) rather than a purely academic approach. Such a view would encourage future learners to embrace language learning as an experiential process (Dong and Zhang, 2023) enriched by social interactions and cultural exploration. It was also emphasized that personal development and language proficiency can be developed in a more organic way, highlighting the need to focus on enjoying formal education rather than overemphasizing it.

In summary, these themes reveal that successful language immersion experiences depend not only on the availability of linguistic resources but also on emotional support, cultural awareness, and adaptive strategies. These findings indicate that exchange programs can enhance students' overall experience by providing resources and opportunities that address the full range of personal, social, cultural, and linguistic challenges they face.

#### **4. Discussion**

The study set out to find out the effect of international exchange programs on EFL students' foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Spanish and five Turkish 3rd year EFL students who participated in the Erasmus+ program.

The semi-structured interviews aimed to explore the experiences of participants before and after the exchange program. The inadequacy of the questionnaire as a standalone tool for data scrutiny necessitated these in-depth interviews. Thematic analyses were

conducted, focusing on the personal experiences and opinions of the students regarding their exposure to English and the impact of the exchange program on their anxiety levels.

It can be said that a major consequence of this study is the association between direct contact with native speakers and decrease of anxiety. It can be referred to the fact that learners in both Turkish and Spanish experimental groups absorbed learning opportunities through real-life language resources and in turn this led to a remarkable increase in their speaking comfort level. It is associated with the theories concerning learner autonomy in the reduction of language anxiety (Horwitz, 2005). Besides, it can even be considered that involved students with less vocabulary of the target language are going to show the most improvement, this should be followed by international programs, which are obligatory for students with an initial level of anxiety higher than average ones to get over.

#### *4.1 Previous Exposure to English*

Participants were invited to indicate their previous exposure to the English language, as background knowledge may affect their perspective on learning. The most frequently coded category was those who had previous experience with the language (f=12), which was linked to a reduction in anxiety. This finding is remarkably in accordance with previous studies (Choi et al., 2019; Bensalem, 2018; MacIntyre et al., 1997) that highlight the motivational effects of prior exposure to English.

#### *4.2. Effect of the Exchange Program*

Regarding the second interview question, participants noted a positive shift in their language proficiency attributed to their daily use of English in the host country. They emphasized that positive feedback from teachers during the program fostered a comfortable environment, reducing their fear of making mistakes and boosting their confidence, aligning with previous research by Han et al. (2016), Rafada and Madini (2017), and Zulkiflee and Nimehchisalem (2022) that underscores the importance of constructive teacher feedback in reducing speaking anxiety.

#### *4.3 Participation in Language Learning Activities*

The fifth interview question sought to determine the impact of language learning activities on FLSA. Findings revealed that students who engaged in such activities reported a reduction in anxiety, supporting the findings of Stravynski and Amado (2001) that suggest involvement in English programs motivates students and reduces ESA.

#### *4.4 Cultural and Social Interactions*

The fourth research question explored the effect of cultural and social interactions on ESA. Participants shared experiences of anxiety stemming from cultural pressures and peer judgements, significantly influencing their willingness to speak English. However, they noted that positive cultural attitudes in the host country helped mitigate these anxieties, illustrating the critical role of cultural awareness in language learning, consistent with earlier studies (Boustani, 2019; Weizman & Snow, 2001).

#### *4.5 Support and Guidance*

The interviews highlighted the role of support systems during the exchange program. Participants expressed a sense of self-reliance but acknowledged the importance of institutional support from coordinators and peers. Many emphasised that constructive feedback from teachers significantly contributed to their learning experience and helped alleviate anxiety, as supported by the findings of Benson (2011) and Dunlosky & Rawson (2012).

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that FLSA is influenced by a combination of factors, including previous exposure to English, effective teacher feedback, cultural engagement, and social support. Participants emphasized the necessity for structured exchange programs that promote language practice while providing emotional and cultural support. These elements are essential in enhancing the overall language learning experience for EFL students participating in international exchange programs.

## **5. Conclusion**

The main purpose of the study was to centre on Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety of EFL students who participated in an international exchange program (Erasmus+). It also aimed to understand how these experiences affected anxiety levels through both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Five research questions guided the study to obtain the results. The framework of the study highlights themes such as changes in language anxiety, the impact of cross-cultural interactions on anxiety, and the critical role of support and guidance during these programs.

The present research investigated how international exchange programs contribute to the decrease of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) among Turkish and Spanish EFL student participants. The results revealed a significant decrease in the anxiety levels among participants. Thus, real-world language immersion and interaction in the target language appear to have a positive impact on learners.

These findings confirm previous research examples, identifying consistent use of real-life or pre-structured online platforms in the target language environment as an important factor in increasing language proficiency and reducing anxiety. In these contexts, students immersed in real-life scenarios—such as those through Erasmus and other exchange programs—have high-frequency exposure to the language and further opportunities for authentic communication. This kind of environment provides participants with ample opportunities to practice speaking within natural social contexts, thereby making a very significant contribution to reducing FLSA.

Additionally, these Spanish and Turkish EFL learners who benefitted from the exchange program and had the opportunity to benefit from continuous speaking practice in their host country reported low levels of anxiety.

The findings revealed any prior experience with the English language so as to consider whether prior language exposure and background knowledge might influence perspective, readiness, and adaptability to learning English abroad. The most common category was having prior experience with the language, followed by reducing speaking anxiety by increasing language awareness (+) (f=4). Many respondents indicated that previous

participation in language courses, language training in language-focused departments, etc. could influence their language readiness and reduce their anxiety levels.

Moreover, the exchange program positively impacted language development, with English as the primary mode of communication, enhancing both skills and comfort. Constructive feedback from instructors abroad reduced participants' fear of mistakes, boosting their confidence and facilitating adaptation.

Participants noted increased confidence post-Erasmus, significantly changing their classroom interactions. Positive classroom experiences abroad diminished speaking anxieties and created a supportive, non-punitive learning environment. Participation in language activities revealed that shy individuals experienced higher anxiety levels. Additionally, being in a new environment and actively engaging in classes significantly improved fluency. Moreover, language usage fostered skill growth through social engagement, emphasizing the benefits of immersion in target language contexts. The study also aimed to determine whether gender and nationality influenced FLSA changes, concluding that neither significantly impacted EFL learners' FLSA scores.

The findings highlighted the significant impact of cultural and social interactions on English-speaking anxiety (ESA) among exchange program participants (Turkish and Spanish). Participants reported that various cultural experiences shaped their anxiety levels and self-confidence in speaking the target language. Also, key anxiety triggers included lack of English knowledge and peer pressure, while adaptive coping strategies, like focusing on personal development, mitigated these anxieties. Both groups emphasized that practicing with native speakers and being in an international environment reinforced their speaking abilities. Cultural immersion and exposure to innovations reduced ESA by enhancing self-efficacy. Supportive social networks helped alleviate anxiety, fostering a willingness to participate in language practice. A non-judgemental learning environment significantly influenced ESA levels, contrasting with judgemental contexts in participants' home countries.

Support mechanisms were found to be crucial for EFL students in international exchange programs, encompassing institutional support and peer interactions that facilitated active language use. Different experiences shaped resilience, while cultural and social integration were essential in reducing anxiety through holistic language learning



approaches. Strategies for overcoming stress, such as self-driven learning, also promoted confidence.

This study emphasizes the positive effects of international exchange programs on reducing foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA).

In conclusion, international exchange programs effectively reduce anxiety among EFL students by providing real-life language practice and cultural enrichment, enabling learners to confront anxieties and fostering a more confident language learning environment.

In summary, the findings of this study underline the need for a systematic exchange program approach that provides instructional support and cultural preparation for students. Programs should balance promoting student autonomy with guidance to ensure full utilization of language immersion experiences. This holistic approach enables intercultural adaptation and linguistic self-confidence, equipping students with skills for successful language learning across borders. Support systems can minimize ESL and foster deep, sustainable language acquisition, highlighting the need for dedicated support for students in exchange programs to overcome anxiety barriers with confidence and resilience.

### *5.1 Pedagogical Implications*

This study contributes meaningfully to the field by providing fresh perspectives for researchers, curriculum designers, and EFL students. The concluding remarks emphasize practical implications for EFL learners and both pre-service and in-service FL teachers. Situated within the Turkish and Spanish context, it offers insights and recommendations applicable to the language-learning landscape. Despite research on reducing English-speaking anxiety (ESA) in exchange programs, there remains a gap in applied research within the Turkish and Spanish educational framework. This study addresses this gap by illustrating learner progress and perspectives on managing ESA through supportive, culturally integrated environments, aiming to enhance language proficiency and intercultural adaptability in EFL contexts.

### *5.2 Implications for Pre-service EFL Education*

The field of EFL incorporates practical and theoretical education responsive to global needs. Language learning programs should support intuitive language grasp and enhance classroom instruction. The constructive role of trainers is crucial in minimizing ESA, necessitating the creation of learning modules that foster self-reliance, self-confidence, and language production. Policymakers should adopt a holistic approach combining linguistic and cultural competencies, which fosters empathy and adaptation skills. The study argues for enriching exchange programs with personalized learning models to promote authentic communication and intercultural experiences.

In summary, the implications reinforce the need for a comprehensive approach to supporting EFL students. By addressing educational, psychological, cultural, and institutional factors, exchange programs can reduce ESA and empower students linguistically and culturally in a globalized world.

### *5.3 Limitations of the Study*

The study focused solely on Spanish and Turkish EFL students, limiting generalizability across broader cultural and linguistic groups. Including diverse backgrounds could enhance understanding of international exchange programs' influence on foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). Variations in prior language exposure and social support systems may have influenced results. Future studies could incorporate more rigorous controls or mixed-method designs to address these factors. The findings are contextualized within the Erasmus+ program, which may not represent other international programs. Exploring multiple programs would broaden the findings' applicability and understanding of program-specific impacts on language anxiety. These limitations highlight areas for future refinement regarding FLSA and international exchange programs: broader participant demographics, longer intervention time spans, and multifactorial data collection methods.

#### 5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

The study indicated the need for further research on the long-term effects of exchange program participation. Future studies may consider longitudinal research to assess the persistence of anxiety reductions and their impact on long-term language proficiency and usage. Exploring these effects across different cultural contexts will help educators and policymakers maximize international exchange programs' benefits for language learners, demonstrating the intervention's wide applicability and potential positive results for diverse participant demographics.

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