Emergency Remote Teaching and the Effects of Online Debate on L2 Speaking Anxiety: Pre-service English Language Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Language learners around the world have had to switch to an online remote teaching mode almost overnight due to the unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic. Hence, they may experience higher levels of L2 speaking anxiety in their language learning process related to their use of new technologies in online learning environments. This research study provides by language educators with some practical suggestions to help their EFL learners reduce their L2 speaking anxiety levels by analyzing the challenges of emergency remote teaching and

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investigating the effects of online debate on pre-service English language teachers' L2 speaking anxiety. The study pursued a mixed method research design. Two sources of data collection were used to explore the participants' L2 speaking anxiety levels and their perceptions of online debating, including a quantitative review of students' speaking anxiety levels before and after the online debate sessions, and an open-response questionnaire. The research population included 33 EFL freshmen students (15 males and 18 females), between the ages of 18 and 21, in ELT department at a state university in Turkey. Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings, some pedagogical implications are proposed in the end.

Keywords: debate, EFL, emergency remote teaching, English L2 speaking anxiety, online learning, pre-service English language teachers

Introduction

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 and the first human victim of coronavirus in China, in December 2019 (WHO, 2020), schools across the world have been completely closed for almost an entire year due to COVID-19 lockdowns (UNICEF, 2021). Turkey also closed schools in mid-March 2020 (16 March) nationwide to prevent the spread of the virus, which led to the testing of distance education on an unprecedented scale. This happened in a short period of time, and so posed a new array of challenges for millions of teachers, students, and policymakers, which they had never experienced before (UNESCO, 2021). Having been coined as 'emergency distance teaching' by Hodges et al. (2020), the primary objective of this new emergent situation was "to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis" (p. 6), rather than being characterized by a high degree of fundamental reforms at all levels in the educational system. This sudden shift from face-to-face classroom settings to emergency remote teaching imposed an urgent need for all students to take their courses online, including English as a foreign language (EFL) learners.

Similarly, in the face of a dramatic increase in anxiety among language learners who have been forced into joining online learning environments due to the outbreak of the global pandemic, it has been a matter of great urgency to address problems of online foreign language learners arising in connection with distant learning platforms. Likewise, foreign language learning creates challenges that must be mastered among second language (L2) learners. Considering the tremendous growth of communication across the globe, especially in the English language, speaking anxiety seems to be spreading among EFL learners (Bahrani et al.,

2020; Baso, 2016). Although anxiety in traditional classroom language learning settings have been a well-researched topic in the literature, further research is needed to assess speaking anxiety among online EFL learners, especially now with a huge number of students who pursue their studies through emergency remote learning from all over the world.

Foreign language anxiety has much influence on the performance of L2 learners, and thus it affects their language learning (Zhao, Guo, & Dynia, 2013). According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), therefore, foreign language anxiety can be defined as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (p. 284). Referring to his 'affective filter hypothesis', Krashen (1982) also highlights that when language learners get anxious, the filter is raised, thereby blocking linguistic input. Hence, "learners' perceived levels of stress and anxiety may exert a negative impact on language learning" (Russell, 2020, p. 3).

Classifying foreign language classroom anxiety into three groups (a) communication apprehension, (b) fear of negative evaluation, and (c) test anxiety, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) reveal that not being able to understand, speak and write the way they are used to, language learners' ability to interact with each other and their capacity for language learning is hindered or reduced to a large extent. It might even lead them to escape from engaging in classroom activities and become less reluctant towards learning a foreign language (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Na, 2007). However, as most teacher education programs focus on traditional face-to-face classroom settings, and thus do not necessarily prioritize support for online educational settings, language theorists and educators are in urgent need to give language learners professional instruction on online language pedagogy and provide them with ways to overcome their possible online foreign language learning anxieties (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020).

Speaking - out of the four skills that must be mastered - is the most important skill to ensure fast interaction and good communication between L2 learners, as, unlike receptive skills, it belongs to productive skills, where students have to put their skills to productive use (Bahrani et al., 2020). Not surprisingly, however, L2 speaking is the most important yet most difficult skill to master among EFL learners (Desmiyanti, Yuanita, & Anwar, 2020; Yassi, 2020). In light of the recent studies in the literature and quite in line with the general trend in online learning environments, the second researcher of this study also observed in his online lessons with his EFL learners that many of the students were reluctant to actively and strongly participate in discussions. They were not able to express their opinions easily and largely kept quiet when they were invited to take part and exchange their views in a given topic in the virtual classrooms.

To address this issue, debating is proposed by some researchers as a method that can be utilized in EFL settings to make learners confident speakers (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013). Highlighting its importance for language learning due to its scaffolding role in enhancing the intellectual performance and cognitive adaptation capacity of L2 learners, Krieger (2005) states that "debate is also highly effective for developing argumentation skills for persuasive speaking" (p. 25). Due to the appreciation of this opinion or because of his belief that online debating can be a medium of real communication among L2 learners in online settings, Chametzky (2013a) included three additional points into the foreign language classroom anxiety for an online environment: 1) the experience of learners functioning in an online environment, 2) the fear of some learners regarding the technological tools, and 3) the complicated learning environment. For that reason, the researchers of the current study decided to implement online debating to find out if it can solve online EFL learners' L2 speaking problems.

Similarly, perceiving speaking anxiety as the most important cause of stress among EFL learners, Kitano (2001) states that speaking skill is the main concern among L2 speakers as it is usually the first thing that they compare with their peers and teachers. Thus, adapted and adopted by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012), from the widely known and much used Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which was designed by Horwitz et al. (1986), the public speaking anxiety scale (PSCAS) will be employed in this study as it specifically measures speaking anxiety levels in EFL speaking classes. The PSCAS (see Appendix A) will be used in this study to explore foreign language speaking anxiety among online EFL learners, who did not freely elect, but had to resort to online learning due to the global pandemic. In addition, online debating sessions will be held to examine the effects of online debating on EFL learners' speaking anxiety levels. Finally, to come up with some practical suggestions on how to alleviate L2 speaking anxiety levels among EFL learners, their perceptions of online debating, based on their emergency online learning experiences, will be explored.

The significance of this study lies in its selection of participants from online EFL learners who have been forced into remote learning. Contrary to the well-established principles and practices of a typical online teaching, the participants in this study have undertaken emergency remote teaching, which does not allow for a trial period and subsequent adaptation to new circumstances and wherein educational practices and the use of Internet materials are certainly not a result of trial and testing due to the emergent situation. What is even more significant is that this study is conducted with future qualified English language teachers, studying in English Language Teaching (ELT) program. The ELT programs aim to train highly

qualified EFL teachers, who are equipped with not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills, especially effective speaking skills, so they should be provided with techniques that will help them cope with L2 speaking anxiety. For this reason, the present study is likely to offer valuable insights into the views of pre-service and in-service English language teachers, practitioners, course designers and policy makers on being in a better position to assess the effects of online debating on EFL learners' speaking anxiety levels and suggest some useful ways on how to alleviate their L2 speaking anxiety levels by helping them raise their self-esteem as well as improving their confidence levels.

Literature Review

L2 Speaking anxiety among online EFL learners

Studies that explored L2 speaking anxiety among online EFL learners revealed that online environments can pose some challenges for this population (Russell, 2018; Pichette, 2009). There are even some researchers suggesting that an online instructional setting could be relatively more complex than a conventional learning environment as it could expose additional challenges for some online language learners (Chametzky, 2019). In their study, for example, Jashapara and Tai (2011) found that online learners who are used to be passive recipients of knowledge in their traditional learning environment will experience a high level of stress in an interactive online learning setting. Hinting specifically at those lacking the self-discipline and the motivation to take the necessary responsibility for their own learning, White (2010) highlights that these online learners need to be ready to move out of their comfort zone if they are to be ideal candidates for online learning.

It has also been argued that their shortage of skills in the use of instructional technologies as well as the target language that is used to communicate can lead to a sensation of anxiety and low self-esteem among online learners (Habibi et al., 2019; Myers, 2008; Ushida, 2005). In fact, a number of studies have even reported that as a consequence of "low thresholds for trying new technologies and high levels of computer anxiety, a traditional classroom setting may be more effective than e-learning interventions" (Jashapara & Tai, 2011, p. 80). Research has demonstrated that in order to struggle with associated problems such as lack of self-efficacy, low confidence and self-esteem, and negative sense of the technological tools, online learners need to strengthen their belief in their own abilities (Aslim-Yetiş & Çapan, 2013). In parallel with this view, Pichette (2009) found that after spending some time in their virtual classrooms, online language learners seemed to be less anxious and appeared to have lower levels of stress than their counterparts in traditional, face-to-face classroom settings.

It was also found that false beliefs can lead to disrupted language acquisition process by restraining some learners from engaging in the acquisition of a new language; for instance, some students might falsely think that they should refrain from speaking in the target language until they learn to speak just like a native speaker (Horwitz, 1988). As a result, "fears about making mistakes may be heightened among students who hold this false belief" (Russell, 2020, p. 6). Moreover, strictly formal learning settings, oral presentation practices and peer evaluation or peer criticism can be considered among the most anxiety-provoking factors in the online EFL environments as they can cause learners to stay away from social interactions in case of appearing incompetent learners in the eyes of their peers (Chametzky, 2013b).

Highly complicated online learning environment could be another source of anxiety for inexperienced online learners as they might become overwhelmed by multiple layers of technological tools as well as the complexity of EFL acquisition (Salcedo, 2010). In an asynchronous environment, according to Chametzky (2019), the risk of miscommunication and subsequent inaccuracy cannot be excluded, because users cannot communicate actively as in social networks. In this regard, Goertler (2011) recommended that instructors should assist learners in using the online instructional technologies as well as providing immediate feedback. Assessing learners' language development and their digital literacy at the onset of the course and utilizing the same technology throughout the course so that learners can become accustomed to it might play an instrumental role in decreasing the anxiety coming from the technical aspects of virtual EFL learning environments (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2020).

Using debate in EFL classes

Speaking is the first assessment of each EFL learner due to its interactive information processing requirements (Ferris, 1998). Therefore, EFL teachers and pre-service English language teachers should be aware of effective teaching methods, and suggest or follow the latest trends in the use of modern techniques that could improve L2 learners' communication skills (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013). One such technique could be the use of debate in EFL classrooms as it can provide EFL teachers with a teaching model that can combine speaking and listening skills, which have been found to be the two biggest problem areas among non-native English speakers (Stewart, 2003). Referring to its capacity to stimulate and refine communication and presentation skills, Nisbett (2003) noted that "debate is an important educational tool for learning analytic thinking skills and for forcing self-conscious reflection on the validity of one's ideas" (p. 210).

In a study conducted with Japanese students, Fukuda (2003) found that the practice of debate led students to become more active when expressing their opinions. When compared to lecture-based instruction, students who were exposed to debates were also found to be better communicators (Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008). Snider and Schnurer (2002) also indicated in their experimental study that there was a high level of engagement shown by students throughout in-class debates, which promoted their transition from passive communicators to active debaters.

Hinting at their limited opportunities in EFL settings for regular use of English in their daily lives, Alasmari and Ahmed (2013) commented that debating offers EFL learners not just entirely new opportunities for expressing their creativity, but also alternative means of communication to engage with their peers in an active way. Arguing that in-class debates, through which participants can confidently express their views, should be conducted in EFL settings as they have proved to be effective for enhancing EFL learners' speaking and critical thinking abilities, Alasmari and Ahmed (2013), lending a note of credibility to their argument, noted that "English language teachers and practitioners have already proved debating as an effective tool in teaching English which is a strong source of motivation for EFL teachers who are yet to use debate in their classes" (p. 148). However, the discussions that have so far taken place in the literature regarding the effects of debates in EFL settings have led to an agreement mostly on lecture-based in-class debates. The utility of online debating for EFL learners' speaking skills and its effect on their L2 speaking anxiety levels is still an issue that needs to be addressed.

Similarly, although there has been a lot of literature on language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Philips, 1992; Sellers, 2000; Zhao, Guo, & Dynia, 2013), much of this literature has been concerned with traditional classroom settings (Russell, 2020). While scant research exists about anxiety in an online foreign language environment, this research only explored learners who personally preferred online learning to traditional classroom instruction (Pichette, 2009; Ushida, 2005; White, 2010). Hence, there seems to be a certain lack of scientific research regarding the EFL speaking anxiety among online learners, who did not freely elect, but were forced into emergency remote learning due to the unprecedented global pandemic. Thus, an urgent need exists for such a study amidst the COVID-19 pandemic related to emergency remote teaching with the growing ubiquity of online learning. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the effect of online debate on EFL learners' speaking anxiety levels and intended to offer some practical suggestions to help reduce their L2 speaking anxiety levels based on their views on language anxiety in online environment. For this purpose, this study aimed to

address the following research questions:

1. Does online debating have a significant effect on the L2 speaking anxiety level of pre-service English language teachers?
2. What are pre-service English language teachers' perspectives towards online debating based on their L2 online debate experiences?

Methodology

Research design

This study pursued a mixed method research design, benefiting from both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. It benefited from sequential compilation of quantitative and qualitative data by explaining qualitatively the findings from the instrument and expanding on quantitative data. Two sources of data collection were used to explore participants' L2 speaking anxiety levels and their perceptions of online debating, including (1) a quantitative review of students' speaking anxiety levels before and after the online debate sessions based on their PSCAS instrument results, and (2) an open-response questionnaire.

Participants

The research population included 33 freshmen EFL students (15 males and 18 females), between the ages of 18 and 21. They were pre-service English language teachers studying in ELT department at a state university in Turkey. A purposeful sampling method was used for the current study to maintain an open and purposeful exchange of opinions from critical participants about a particular topic. The participants had all passed the pre-intermediate level of General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), which was conducted by the Department of Foreign Languages at the same university, thus they were all at the intermediate level. The ELT programs in Turkey are responsible for training highly qualified EFL teachers. The program aims to provide candidate teachers with not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills as well. The participants in our study were taking the *Oral Communication I* course online via the Open Moodle Platform of the university in the first semester of 2020-2021 academic year.

Instrumentation

For the quantitative part of the study, data were collected using the PSCAS designed by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012). The scale was used to measure online EFL learners' speaking anxiety levels while learning a language in the online educational setting. The PSCAS consists of 17 items in the form of a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly

disagree (1). The total speaking anxiety scores for the scale range from 17 to 85 points. The answer -*strongly agree*- shows high level of speaking anxiety, whereas -*strongly disagree*- displays low level of speaking anxiety of the participants. To put it another way, according to Yaikhong and Usaha (2012), "scores higher than 68 were categorized as high anxiety, between 68-51 as medium anxiety, and lower than 51 as low anxiety" (p. 33). Based on Cronbach's coefficient alpha and test-retest reliability, the internal consistency coefficient of the PSCAS is .84. On the basis of the broadly acceptable reliability coefficient of .70, the PSCAS is a valid and reliable scale (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993). In addition, some items of the PSCAS were negative (Items # 4, 8, 10, 12), so their values were reversed. With regards to speaking anxiety levels based on mean, "scores which fall within the interval of 3-4 were categorized as medium anxiety level, below 3 as low anxiety level, and above 4 as high anxiety level, respectively" (Yaikhong & Usaha, 2012, p. 33).

With regards to the qualitative data collection, all the participants were invited by the instructor, who is the first author of this study, for face-to-face online synchronous interviews. Seven of them agreed. However, they all preferred online written open-response questionnaire to personal oral interviews, stating that they wanted to elaborate on their replies without time restrictions. Thus, an open-response questionnaire was carried out to gain a clearer perception of the participants about online debating upon their online debate sessions. Consent letters and the open-ended questions were sent to the participants via email. The items of the open-response questionnaire were adapted from Tous, Tahriri, and Haghighi (2015), following Heigham and Croker's (2009) guidelines for the preparation of interview questions (see Appendix B) and the development of good quality qualitative research. The reliability and validity of the interview questions were also confirmed by an outside expert in the ELT department.

Procedure

Participants in this study were taking the *Oral Communication I* course online. In order to explore the effect of online debating on their speaking anxiety and their attitudes towards online debating, the 'Meeting-House Debate' strategy was implemented as the treatment for six weeks (Tous, Tahriri, & Haghighi, 2015). The participants spent one full hour each week debating on a pre-determined list of topics. Based on the Meeting-House Debate strategy, the participants were randomly assigned to two groups. First each side put forward its opening argument with one representative speaker from each group by defining their group's position in relation to the arguments raised by the opponent group. Then, the rest of the class asked specific questions to the debaters or commented on their statements. Acting as a moderator, the

instructor ensured that each team received equal treatment and was urged to display itself by having each member actively engage in discussions. All participants in each group were expected to express their critical opinions, offer comments, or ask for reason.

During an online brainstorming session of about twenty minutes, participants independently generated ideas that were subsequently grouped to be discussed openly. Brainstorming and open discussion were used for the idea generating process to decide on a topic and then debate. The participants were asked to share their ideas first, and then a poll was conducted to determine the most popular topic for the next session (see Table 1). Thus, the participants were assigned weekly by the instructor to prepare for the debate sessions on controversial topics of their own choice in advance. Therefore, they would be able to take a position on the possible arguments that might be brought against them and avoid being put on the defensive. As the debate topics were determined previously, the participants had the chance to come up with clear, definitive backing for their ideas and prepare the ground for their central arguments on the subject during the virtual debate sessions.

Table 1: Debate topics

Week 1	Should university students be required to attend classes?
Week 2	If you were an employer, would you prefer to hire an inexperienced worker at a lower salary or an experienced worker at a higher salary?
Week 3	Are video games useful or harmful for kids?
Week 4	Should supermarkets charge for plastic bags?
Week 5	Should religion be taught in schools?
Week 6	Will the future of artificial intelligence (AI) have positive or negative effects on the society?

Prior to the beginning of each debate session, the instructor gave a brief explanation of the debate etiquette, and then, after setting the scene for the online discussion, he raised appropriate questions in order to stimulate debate among both sides. Generally, the instructor started the debate first by picking one of the debaters from either group randomly to get across his/her points to the class. Upon the command given by the instructor, one of the speakers on the opposing team responded by putting forward his/her opposing arguments based on logic, data and information, thus providing explanations as to why he/she disagrees with his/her classmate. Later, to defend his/her own claims, another speaker from the other team raised a counterargument against the opposing team. The instructor sometimes raised some questions to members of either group as well as having them handle the questions asked by the opposing

team, which enabled them to discuss the topic at length and in depth. Moderated by the instructor, the speaking time was divided equally and the turn for speaking was organized regularly for each member of both opposing teams during each debate session. Finally, the debate teams were provided with specific suggestions for more speaking practice and given feedback about their performance by the instructor. Each online debate session followed this path.

As for the data collection procedures, on the basis of ethical considerations, the data collection process started by the researcher's consulting head of the department and getting permission to conduct the research. The oral consent of all participants was obtained based on strict data protection guidelines. The participants were informed that they have the right to decide whether or not to participate in the study and that they may stop participating in the study at any stage if they decide to participate in it. Upon being told about the significance of their sincere answers on the open-response questionnaire items, the participants were told that nothing would be in their disadvantage in accordance with a clearly defined study protocol, which is regulated by the ethics committee in the context where this study was conducted.

The quantitative data collection had two phases. The questionnaire (PSCAS) was distributed twice, before (pre-test scale) and after (post-test scale) the implementation. Before the implementation of the online debate sessions, the students were asked to complete the questionnaire, which was the first phase of the data collection. After the six-week implementation, the students were asked to complete the same questionnaire again to see if there was any change in their speaking anxiety levels. The scale was administered to examine the effect of online debating on the participants' online speaking anxiety levels. As for the data qualitative part of the study, the data were collected through an open-response questionnaire after the completion of six-week treatment to gain valuable insights into the participants' overall views on online debating.

Data analysis

Inferential statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, using SPSS software, Version 24. A paired-samples t-test was used to compare the differences between two data sets provided by the same participants at different times and to make inferences from sample data and to draw conclusions about the population. The mean PSCAS scores of the participants were calculated to compare the statistical differences before and after the treatment. In addition, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to find out whether significant differences existed in the overall anxiety levels of the students.

The qualitative data, on the other hand, were analyzed using content analysis method (van Manen, 2016). In addition, based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method, participants' responses for the open-response questionnaire were indexed, examined, and processed through line-by-line coding. After initial analyses of the raw data were conducted by the researchers, the authors took some notes on the drafts of each respondent, questioning the parts that were not clear and marking places where they needed clarification. Later, the first author negotiated a suitable time and date with each respondent to further discuss the data and the preliminary analyses.

Using the approach promoted by Yin (2003), the member checking method was used by conducting a joint online feedback session with each respondent separately to discuss their responses. Before the online feedback sessions were implemented, each respondent was sent his/her written draft via email one week ahead of the scheduled appointment. The respondents were asked to read the notes in the margins of the texts and reflect on the marked places where the authors needed extensive clarification. The first author and the respondents then met through video conferencing on Zoom to negotiate the emergent themes and to confirm or contest the initial analysis of the data. During this process, the respondents clarified some details asked by the researcher, made some extensions, and addressed some items that they felt were missing. The researcher was taking notes and asking clarifying questions that he felt would help improve this meaning-making process. After this multi-layered process was completed, the two researchers met again via online video conferencing to negotiate the revised responses of the respondents, and thus assure inter-coder reliability and maximize the rigor of their analysis. During this iterative process, common themes related to students' online experiences and their perceptions of online debating were formulated by the researchers.

Findings

RQ1: Does online debating have a significant effect on the L2 speaking anxiety level of pre-service English language teachers?

First, reliability of the scale was quantified using all 33 participant responses. Cronbach's alpha for the PSCAS in the current study was .95. Then, the normality of the quantitative data was assessed. As can be seen in Table 2 below, the Shapiro–Wilk test results indicated that the pre-test (p = 0.351) and the post-test (p = 0.385) were normally distributed as they had statistically nonsignificant results (p >.05).

Table 2: Tests of normality for pre-test scale and post-test scale

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-test Scale	.084	33	.200*	.965	33	.351
Post-test Scale	.080	33	.200*	.966	33	.385

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Hence, a paired-samples t-test was conducted (see Table 3) to see whether the online debating had a significant effect on the participants' speaking anxiety level. The 33 participants had an average difference from pre-test to post-test anxiety scores of -13.9 (SD = 22.5), indicating that the anxiety treatment resulted in a significant decrease in participants' anxiety levels (t (32) = -3.55, p < 05). Then, effect size was calculated to compare means (Cohen, 1988). The calculation was found to be 0.2. This suggests a small effect size, which means that the mean difference is large enough to be considered important. In other words, it means that the decreased anxiety level of the students after the intervention can be seen through careful study.

Table 3: Paired-samples t-test

					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Post-test to Pre-test	-13.96	22.58	3.93	-21.97	-5.96	-3.55	32	.001

Moreover, as shown in Table 4 below, the pre-test PSCAS scores of the participants ranged from 26 to 85, with a mean of 56.78 (*SD* = 16.59), showing that the participants had a medium anxiety level before the treatment, while their post-test PSCAS scores ranged from 17 to 74 with a mean of 42.82 (*SD* = 15.34), indicating a low anxiety level after the treatment.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Pre- and Post-Test Scales

	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	56.79	42.82
Median	57	43
Mode	55	53
Std. Deviation	16.60	15.34
Minimum	26	17
Maximum	85	74

As shown in Figure 1 below, participants' anxiety levels changed from medium (*M* = 56.78, *SD* = 16.59) to low-anxiety level (*M* = 42.82, *SD* = 15.34) after online debate treatment. As Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) explained, "scores higher than 68 were categorized as high anxiety, between 68-51 as medium anxiety, and lower than 51 as low anxiety" (p. 33).

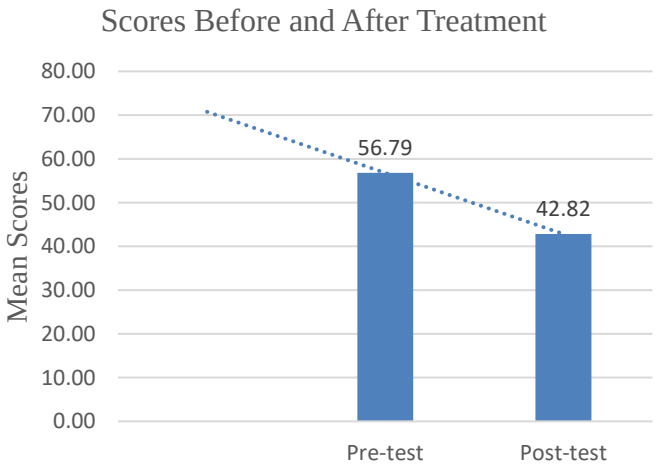


Figure 1. Comparison of pre- and post-test scales

All in all, the paired-samples t-test and the descriptive statistics give answer to the 1st research question; "Does online debating have a significant effect on the L2 speaking anxiety level of pre-service English language teachers?". The results showed that online debating has a statistically significant effect in decreasing the online EFL learners' L2 speaking anxiety levels.

RQ2: What are pre-service English language teachers' perspectives towards online debating based on their L2 online debate experiences?

To gain deeper insights and further understanding of the students' perceptions towards online debating and its effect on their L2 speaking anxiety, an open-response questionnaire was conducted. Qualitative evaluation of the questionnaire was made with comparison to the quantitative findings in relation to the second research question above. Content analyses of the qualitative data revealed the following themes: (a) increase in active involvement (b) increase in collaboration, and (c) decrease in fear of making mistakes.

(a) increase in active involvement

The participants generally hold favorable perspectives towards online debating as it provides them with not only quick but also direct contact and an open dialogue with their peers.

The findings and analysis of the data also suggest that online debating offers new ways to boost students' involvement in collaboration with their peers and inspires an increased awareness and active involvement in their virtual environment. Participant 3, for instance, stated that "Thinking about how to defend my idea is very exciting and keeps me stay active in online classes." Participant 2 also commented that "As we were speaking about our interests or interesting topics, I tried to stay actively engaged in the online classes." Seeing online debating as an opportunity for them to improve their speaking skills, cope with stress, and reduce speaking anxiety, Participant 5 highlighted that "I think the online debating sessions are useful in terms of being active because, in the online classes, we cannot become active a lot ... This (online debating) is an opportunity to be involved, improve speaking, and mostly deal with anxiety." However, there were opposite views also. For instance, Participant 7 openly said that "It (online debating) increases my anxiety. I don't have too much trouble preparing videos but talking in class still scares me."

(b) increase in collaboration

Online debating, through its informal educational experience, demonstrates the importance of learning as a social process, offering possibilities for collaboration and interaction with other learners, and guidance from instructors. Speaking of online debating, with reference to a wide range of opportunities it offers for collaboration and peer engagement, students often mentioned the development of their social consciousness thanks to the online debate sessions, which served as great stimulants in supporting the establishment of social skills such as collaboration, networked thinking, solidarity, and interactive engagement. Participant 1, for instance, stated that "These debating sessions helped me to know my classmates better … I find it more interesting when we do things in a class all together." Highlighting the effect of online debating in the acquisition of their social skills and its constructive role in helping them deal with speaking anxiety, Participant 4 stressed that "The more we engage in these in-class talking, the more we'll become good at it; thus, our anxiety levels will be lowered … First, we've developed our speaking skills via presentations then we've developed our social skills via debates." Participant 5 also said, "I think these online debating sessions enabled us to exchange ideas on issues that need to be considered." However, there were some students holding opposite views regarding online debating, Participant 6, for instance, saying that "Doing this activity (online debating) in distance learning is not that useful. I wish we could do this activity face to face. I'm sure that way it is going to be much more beneficial."

(c) decrease in fear of making mistakes

Most of the participants are positive about online debating as it seems to have benefits that range from fending off fear of making mistakes and anxiety to helping them deal with problems like lack of concentration and antisocial behaviors. Most of the students emphasized that it encouraged them to develop a mindset that welcomes and embraces mistakes, which helped them let go of their fears of making mistakes and allow them to happen until they get rid of their speaking anxiety. Participant 3 commented that "Online debates showed that there is nothing to be afraid of. The thought of making mistakes in front of people was something that kept me from talking." Participant 1 also agreed, stating that "I realized that I wasn't making too many mistakes when I started talking. The mistakes I made did not matter much when I finished my speaking. Consequently, online debating reduces my speaking anxiety level." Similarly, it was noted by some students that the fear of making mistakes was the biggest hindrance in their learning a foreign language, however the idea that 'we all make mistakes – nobody is perfect!' seems to have played a mediating role to a large extent to help them reduce their L2 speaking anxiety and relax, as Participant 4 put it, "Now I can feel the difference in me. I am more confident when speaking. I'm aware of my mistakes and I'm proud of it because I am not native speaker and as I speak more, I'll be more fluent." Participant 2 also said "If we talk spontaneously, I cannot be active like in now debating session. Since I prepared myself, also the teacher says, 'You can make mistakes. It is normal.' I feel confident, and I become engaged in the class." As usual, although not many, there were also difference of opinions raised, like Participant 7 who said that "Actually, I am very afraid to talk in lectures, I know that no one will judge or mock me about it, but I am still ashamed." Participant 6 also highlighted that "Not having to have my webcam open during class could help. When I'm online and have a webcam open, I feel quite stressed."

Overall, analyses of the participants' comments seem to be in line with the quantitative findings as the responses of the participants seem to support the quantitative results, which suggest that online debating has helped decrease pre-service English language teachers' L2 speaking anxiety. Although their attitudes towards online debating remain generally favorable and constructive, a note of caution is due here since there were some participants who could be considered displeased with online debating or reluctant to participate in online events, engage in personal discussions, or contribute to debate sessions as they were seemingly still suffering from anxiety or just from sheer neglect.

Discussions

The first research question aimed to find out whether online debating has a significant effect on the L2 speaking anxiety level of pre-service English language teachers. The decrease from pre-test to post-test scores (see Table 3) revealed that online debating had a statistically significant effect in decreasing the online EFL learners' L2 speaking anxiety levels. This result is consistent with some of the previous research studies which found that language learners had lower levels of anxiety after having participated in debate sessions (Nisbett, 2003; Pichette, 2009; Snider & Schnurer, 2002). A possible explanation for this outcome might be that online debating offered online participants the opportunity to share their experiences with peers, thus developing confidence in their own abilities. Alternatively, online debating may have had a key role in promoting positive social relations or joint learning activities among peers, which helped them cope with their L2 speaking anxiety. This result could also be explained by the fact that thanks to the regular online sessions, the students took advantage of the opportunity to learn about their roles and responsibilities as debaters, which, in collaboration with their peers, led them to develop goals and action plans, thereby helping them relatively get rid of their L2 speaking anxiety.

The second research question sought to explore pre-service English language teachers' attitudes towards online debating based on their L2 online debate experiences. The qualitative findings revealed that online debating helped the students reduce their speaking anxiety and improve their L2 speaking skills by encouraging their social involvement and active online participation in the subjects for which they were responsible to defend. These findings are in accord with other studies which found that the practice of debate led students to become more active when expressing their opinions, and so they were found to be better communicators (Omelicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008; Fukuda, 2003). It may be that these participants benefitted from a high degree of self-initiative, a team spirit, and the ability to cope with stress, which were promoted by online debating. However, the few reports, indicating tendencies in the opposite direction as to the mediating role of debating in relation to anxiety may be explained by some participants' shortage of skills in the use of instructional technologies or their low thresholds for trying new technologies, as demonstrated in earlier studies (Jashapara & Tai, 2011; Myers, 2008; Ushida, 2005).

Consistent with the literature, the present study also found that debating reinforced students' solidarity by promoting active engagement and enhancing their social skills. It also offered students a wide range of opportunities for interactive engagement. These findings are on the same track with previous studies which found that debating offers EFL learners'

alternative means of communication to engage with their peers in an active way (Alasmari & Ahmed, 2013). The findings also mirror those of the previous studies revealing that there is a high level of engagement shown by students throughout in-class debates, which promotes their transition from passive communicators to active debaters (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). These results are likely to be related with the increase in the amount of interaction and cooperation thanks to the emergence of feelings of alliances and solidarity among group members. When it comes to the possible reasons for some of the students' opposite views about online debating, it seems possible that lack of self-efficacy beliefs, low levels of self-confidence (Aslim-Yetiş & Çapan, 2013), unwillingness to move out of their comfort zone (White, 2010), or lack of motivation in participating in interactive online learning setting (Jashapara & Tai, 2011) could have caused hesitance on the part of the very few participants to hold a positive attitude towards online debating.

The findings of the current study lastly revealed that their online debate experiences helped the students to feel free to make as many mistakes as they can, because they seem to have come to the conclusion that the fear of making mistakes blocks their creativity. These results reflect those of Russell (2020) and Horwitz (1988), who also indicated that false beliefs, such as fears about making mistakes, being too perfectionist, or having an idealistic view about not making any mistakes, may lead some students to refrain from speaking in the target language until they learn to speak just like a proficient speaker. The reason why the participants in the current study mostly seem to have got rid of their fears might be in the new perception they gained after having participated in debating sessions. It seems their new perception that fluency in a foreign language arises from making mistakes has superseded their fear of making mistakes. The reason for the some students who have not been able to overcome their shyness, on the other hand, might have something to do with some anxiety-provoking factors, such as strictly formal learning settings, lack of oral presentation practices, or the possibility of being subject to peer criticism, as indicated by Chametzky (2013b).

Conclusion and Implications

Although we believe that the present study has made a notable contribution to the current literature by covering the issue of L2 speaking anxiety faced during the emergency remote teaching from ELT pre-service teachers' perspectives, it has a few limitations. For instance, the limited number of participants makes the generalization of the results for larger groups difficult. Not having a control group to compare the results is another limitation, as this would provide us with the opportunity to compare perceptions of two different online classes

taught by different teaching methods such as one with online debating vs without online debating strategy. However, the study still offers some important insights into EFL learners' attitudes towards online debating and its effect on their L2 speaking anxiety levels. Considering the lack of scientific research regarding the EFL speaking anxiety among online learners during the emergency remote teaching, it provides useful information and practical suggestions on how to alleviate L2 speaking anxiety levels among online EFL learners during this emergency, as their suggestions were also given due consideration. In addition, given the scant research in the literature on L2 speaking anxiety in an online EFL environment with future EFL teachers amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic, the study also provides insights into EFL teaching and contributes to the current educational conditions by enabling us to gain a clear picture as to the global challenges resulting from this worldwide experience and offering some solutions that can be used by EFL teachers globally, who were required to teach online in a situation of emergency.

This study showed that online debating had a statistically significant effect in decreasing the online EFL learners' L2 speaking anxiety levels. This finding is in line with the literature that has been concerned with traditional face-to-face classroom settings. This study also indicated that considering the benefits they have gained from online debating such as active involvement, networked thinking, the feeling of solidarity, interactive engagement, effective collaboration, and the development of a positive mindset towards making mistakes, online EFL learners mostly seem to have favorable attitudes towards online debating during the emergency remote teaching process.

The present study also has some important implications for online EFL teachers and pre-service English language teachers as it supported the need for online debating which was shown to be effective in helping EFL learners cope with their L2 speaking anxiety. EFL teachers, who are currently implementing emergency remote teaching, should also consider using debate techniques in their online EFL instructions.

The current study also has some suggestions for the participants, who were suffering from L2 speaking anxiety during online debating sessions. Though very few in number, they were not without significance. One suggestion for alleviating their L2 speaking anxiety could be to diversify the methods of debating or to organize spontaneous debate sessions as well as the premediated ones. Having them plan and participate in informal debates without the presence of an instructor might also work, as this will undoubtedly help them lessen their anxiety and let them fully enjoy this exciting new experience. Alternatively, asking shy students to watch their recordings and having them reflect on their own performances to explore

their own strengths and weaknesses and identify their priorities for change might help them evaluate their current situation and redefine their communication strategies. Moreover, camera off options should be allowed and shy students' readiness to accept camera on discussions should be tolerated, as this might lead to an increased and progressive engagement, which could help them be aware of their problems and the real reasons for their L2 speaking anxiety.

Finally, setting up a both synchronous and asynchronous schedule might increase students' satisfaction and engagement as the success of emergency remote teaching seems to be related not only to the affordances of technology but also to the learning styles of the learners. While engagement and cooperation between students could be fostered with synchronous communication, the provision of asynchronous lessons might help students carry out further educational activities that will offer them opportunities to practice speaking skills at their own pace, thus decreasing the feeling of pressure and ensuring the amount of time committed to English. Future studies could examine the effect of synchronous and asynchronous dimensions on facilitating debate and engagement between EFL learners, or they might investigate the effect of online debating on EFL learners' academic achievement regarding their L2 speaking skills.

Disclosure of Ethical Issues

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A

PSCAS

Item No	Statements adopted with minor adaptation in wordings	Opinion				
		(5) Strongly Agree	(4) Agree	(3) Undecided	(2) Disagree	(1) Strongly Disagree
1	I never feel quite sure of myself while I am speaking English.					
2	I start to panic when I have to speak English without a preparation in advance.					
3	In a speaking class, I can get so nervous I forget things I know.					
4	I feel confident while I am speaking English.					
5	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking English.					
6	I am afraid that other students will laugh at me while I am speaking English.					
7	I get nervous when the English teacher asks me to speak English which I have prepared in advance.					
8	I have no fear of speaking English.					
9	I can feel my heart pounding when I am going to be called on.					
10	I feel relaxed while I am speaking English.					
11	It embarrasses me to volunteer to go out first to speak English					
12	I face the prospect of speaking English with confidence.					
13	Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am speaking English.					
14	I feel anxious while I am waiting to speak English.					
15	I dislike using my voice and body expressively while I am speaking English.					
16	I have trouble to coordinate my movements while I am speaking English.					
17	Even if I am very well prepared, I feel anxious about speaking English.					

Appendix B

1. How did you find the online debating sessions in your online classes?

2. What do you think about the role of online debating in your speaking anxiety?

3. Do you think that the debate technique encouraged you to stay actively engaged in the online classes?

4. In what ways do you think the online debating you experienced can be improved?