



Fear of Negative Evaluation among Pre-Service EFL Teachers: Learner Characteristics and Contact with Native English Speakers

Ahmet Serkan Tanrıöver^{a*}

^a Asst. Prof., Bursa Technical University, Türkiye; ORCID: 0000-0002-0854-2619

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the level of fear of negative evaluation (FNE) among pre-service EFL teachers, to explore differences in FNE based on gender and academic year, and to examine the relationship between FNE and contact with native English speakers. A quantitative-dominant mixed-methods design was employed. Survey data were collected from 355 students in a Turkish state university's English Language Teaching program using the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale and a background questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 participants. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, independent-samples t tests, one-way ANOVA, and the Kruskal-Wallis test, while interview data were analyzed thematically. Participants' overall FNE was near the midpoint of the scale. Female participants scored significantly higher on FNE than male participants, with an effect size approaching a medium level. No significant difference was found across academic years. Taking a course taught by a native English-speaking teacher was not significantly associated with FNE. However, the frequency of meeting and communicating with native English speakers outside class was associated with a small yet significant overall difference in FNE. In the interviews, FNE was related to fear of errors, anticipated judgment by teachers and peers, comparison with peers, and stress during oral exams. Supportive reactions, preparation, and regular speaking practice were reported as helpful. The results suggest that teacher education programs should introduce oral performance tasks gradually and provide positive feedback, supportive peer interaction, and opportunities for meaningful communication to foster speaking confidence and reduce evaluative pressure.

Keywords: fear of negative evaluation, pre-service EFL teachers, speaking anxiety, native-speaker contact, teacher education.

Research Article

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Because students are not merely intellectual processors in the language acquisition system, emotional factors can play a critical role in foreign language learning. Students' motivation, self-confidence, beliefs,

* Corresponding author. Department of Translation and Interpreting, Bursa Technical University, Türkiye.
e-mail address: ahmet.tanrioever@btu.edu.tr

attitudes, and anxieties can either facilitate or hinder the second language learning process (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Foreign language anxiety, in particular, has been the subject of numerous research studies because it can undermine the construction and use of knowledge (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). In other words, students who have a deep understanding of the linguistic material (grammar and vocabulary) may fail to perform adequately due to high levels of anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation is a social-evaluative concern defined as apprehension about being judged negatively by others (J. et al., 2015). FNE is considered as a factor that can contribute to this anxiety rather than being synonymous with it (Okyar, 2023). Learners who anticipate unfavorable judgment by teachers or peers may become reluctant to speak, and thus underperform in oral activities (Alrabai, 2014).

Foreign language speaking is considered as one of the major sources of anxiety because it requires learners to perform language-based tasks, particularly in oral activities, in front of their classmates and teachers (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1991). Due to its nature, oral performance does not allow learners the same amount of time to plan, monitor, correct, and produce language as the tasks of other core skills do (Young, 1991). It is a fact that in instructional settings, teachers and classmates may judge foreign language learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and fluency (Horwitz et al., 1986). Therefore, answering questions, performing presentations, and making speeches in foreign language classroom can be anxiety-provoking for learners (Young, 1991).

Such concerns may be relevant to pre-service EFL teachers. While they are developing their language skills, they are also preparing for a career in which they will need to use English confidently, communicate ideas clearly, and manage classroom communication. Speaking and performing in front of a class are therefore crucial to their academic success and professional identity (Haroud et al., 2025; Kuluşaklı & Genç, 2024). Worry about making mistakes or appearing inadequate may develop into fear of negative evaluation which is a social-evaluative concern characterized by apprehension about being evaluated by others, distress over negative judgments, and avoidance of evaluative situations (Pastor & Miller, 2019). In Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's model of foreign language classroom anxiety, fear of negative evaluation appears as one of the three performance anxieties linked to oral performance, alongside communication apprehension and test anxiety (Szyszka, 2011).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Foreign language classroom anxiety includes fear of negative evaluation, one of the three components of the construct alongside communication apprehension and test anxiety (Papi & Khajavy, 2023). Fear of negative evaluation refers to learners' concern about being negatively evaluated, facing disapproval, or failing to make a favorable impression in evaluative situations, and it may also involve distress over negative judgments and avoidance of evaluative situations (Pastor & Miller, 2019). It is important, however, to keep FNE conceptually distinct from speaking anxiety itself: FNE is a broader social-evaluative concern (Szyszka, 2011) that is not confined to language classrooms (Dewaele, 2017) and is best regarded as a factor that can contribute to foreign language anxiety rather than as the anxiety itself (Mahmoud, 2024). Such concerns may be even more important in a foreign language classroom in which students are expected to interact using a linguistic system that they have not yet fully mastered.

These concerns may be especially pertinent to pre-service EFL teachers. They are still developing their language proficiency, yet they are also preparing for a career that will require them to use English confidently, to explain ideas clearly, and to manage classroom communication. They are required to speak and to perform in front of a class which are the critical skills for their academic achievement and professional identity (Haroud et al., 2025; Kuluşaklı & Genç, 2024). Fear of negative evaluation may be closely related to fear of making mistakes or appearing inadequate. In essence, it is a social-evaluative

concern about being judged by others (Szyszka, 2011) that can heighten the anxiety learners feel in speaking situations without being identical to that anxiety (Okyar, 2023). In the present study, therefore, FNE is treated as a distinct construct that may contribute to foreign language speaking anxiety, not as a component of it (Mahmoud, 2024).

Table 1

Conceptual Distinctions Among Communication Apprehension, Test Anxiety, and Fear of Negative Evaluation

Construct	Definition	Role in the present study
Communication apprehension	Fear or anxiety about communicating with people, which can hinder learners' ability to speak fluently and accurately (Alhasan & Amar, 2024)	One of the three components of Horwitz et al.'s model of foreign language classroom anxiety (Papi & Khajavy, 2023)
Test anxiety	Performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure in evaluative situations (Papi & Khajavy, 2023)	One of the three components of Horwitz et al.'s model (Papi & Khajavy, 2023)
Fear of negative evaluation	A social-evaluative concern about being judged by others, involving apprehension, distress over negative judgments, and avoidance of evaluative situations (Pastor & Miller, 2019)	Treated as a distinct construct that contributes to speaking anxiety; measured separately in this study (Okyar, 2023)

1.3. Purpose and Significance

The present study investigates pre-service EFL teachers' fear of negative evaluation in the setting of a Turkish university. The first aim is to determine the participants' level of fear of negative evaluation and identify the concerns most clearly reflected in their responses. The second aim is to investigate whether there is a difference in the level of fear of negative evaluation according to gender and academic year. Analysis of these variables may reveal whether evaluative concerns are experienced differently across groups and stages of teacher education. The third aim is to investigate whether contact with native English speakers is related to fear of negative evaluation. Contact is measured by whether participants have taken a course taught by a native speaker of English and how often they meet and speak with native speakers of English outside class.

The study is significant because pre-service EFL teachers are expected to develop the oral confidence needed for academic study and classroom practice (Haroud et al., 2025; Kuluşaklı & Genç, 2024). Identifying the characteristics related to fear of negative evaluation may help teacher educators recognize groups or situations that require support. The findings may contribute to the design of low-anxiety learning environments, supportive feedback practices, gradual speaking tasks, and communication opportunities (Attia & Algazo, 2025; Haroud et al., 2025; Young, 1991). Such practices may encourage participation while helping pre-service teachers develop confidence in using English before others.

1.4. Research Questions

Based on the purposes of the study, three research questions were formulated in this context. The questions move from describing the participants' overall fear of negative evaluation to examining group differences and the possible role of contact with native English speakers. They guided the selection, analysis, and presentation of the quantitative data:

1. What is the level of fear of negative evaluation among pre-service EFL teachers?

2. Does fear of negative evaluation among pre-service EFL teachers differ according to gender and academic year?
3. Is pre-service EFL teachers' contact with native English speakers associated with their fear of negative evaluation?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety and Speaking

Foreign language anxiety is the fear and apprehension that learners feel when they are learning or using another language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Because of the different definitions and measures of anxiety, initial findings were inconsistent (Scovel, 1978). Further research identified trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to the tendency to feel anxious in a wide range of situations. State anxiety is a temporary emotional state that occurs in response to a given event. Situation-specific anxiety arises in a specific context, such as a foreign language classroom (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

Foreign language classroom anxiety is a situation-specific response and is distinct from general anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). It encompasses learners' self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in relation to language learning in the classroom. The framework has three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension is the fear or anxiety associated with either speaking or listening to others. Test anxiety is the fear of performing poorly on a test. The fear of being negatively judged by teachers and peers is the fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Speaking is particularly stressful as it is immediate, unprepared, and public (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1991). Students have to select words, use grammar, control pronunciation, and speak with others at the same time. They have little time to change their speech before it is heard. Questions and discussions in the classroom, presentations, and oral examinations can create evaluative pressure and reveal linguistic shortcomings (Young, 1991; Okyar, 2023).

Meta-analyses have also documented a robust negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and language achievement (Teimouri et al., 2019; Zhang, 2019). Anxious learners may be reluctant to participate, lose concentration, avoid participation, or experience difficulty retrieving linguistic knowledge when communicating (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Phillips (1992) found that language anxiety was negatively related to students' performance and attitudes toward oral tests, especially speaking tests. Hence, anxiety can affect not only learners' speaking scores but also their willingness to take part in oral practice and improve their proficiency (Phillips, 1992; Teimouri et al., 2019).

2.2. Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) is a social-evaluative form of anxiety about how one may be judged by others (Watson & Friend, 1969). Watson and Friend (1969) defined it as fear of others' evaluation, anxiety following negative judgments, avoidance of evaluative situations, and anticipation of negative evaluation. Higher levels of FNE may be associated with a strong concern about how one is perceived and a fear that one's actions will result in criticism, rejection, or disapproval (Leary, 1983; Watson & Friend, 1969). This fear may be a fear of answering incorrectly, a fear of making a mistake, or a fear of not being seen as competent as other students (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986).

Given this need to assess individual differences in these kinds of concerns, Watson and Friend (1969) developed the original 30-item Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale. However, the length of the scale may hinder its utility. To overcome this limitation, Leary (1983) developed a brief form of 12 items. The short

form was psychometrically equivalent to the long form and was quicker to administer (Leary, 1983). Its items pertain to concerns about others' evaluations, self-awareness of one's shortcomings, disapproval, criticism, and making an unfavorable impression (Leary, 1983). Thus, the scale measures a general tendency to worry about negative evaluation from others rather than concern about a particular language skill.

FNE becomes relevant to foreign language learning because learners communicate before teachers and peers while their linguistic knowledge is developing (Horwitz et al., 1986). Horwitz et al. (1986) positioned FNE as one component of foreign language classroom anxiety, alongside communication apprehension and test anxiety. Learners who fear negative judgment may avoid volunteering answers, speaking without preparation, or participating in activities that expose their language limitations (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1991). Evidence from EFL settings has connected negative-evaluation concerns with unwillingness to communicate and speaking-in-class anxiety (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Mak, 2011). Research with Turkish university EFL learners has also found a positive relationship between FNE and speaking anxiety and identified FNE as a predictor of speaking anxiety (Okyar, 2023).

However, FNE and foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) should not be treated as identical constructs (Okyar, 2023). FNE concerns anticipated judgments from others and can arise in many social or performance settings (Watson & Friend, 1969). FLSA is connected to speaking in a foreign language and may involve communication apprehension, limited proficiency, low speaking self-efficacy, task demands, or classroom experiences in addition to FNE (Mak, 2011; Okyar, 2023). FNE is therefore better understood as one source or contributing factor of FLSA. This distinction allows researchers to examine socially evaluative concerns without assuming that every form of speaking anxiety results from fear of other people's judgments.

2.3. Gender and Academic Year

Gender has been investigated as a potential source of variation in foreign language anxiety, yet the findings are mixed (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2023; Bensalem, 2021; Okyar, 2023). Some studies suggest that female learners tend to report higher levels of anxiety than male learners (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2023; Okyar, 2023). Okyar (2023) found that female EFL learners had higher speaking anxiety. Almusharraf and Bailey (2023) found that female students experienced more anxiety in communication, writing, and negative evaluation. These differences may be related to the way in which participants perceive and report emotions (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2023). However, higher self-report scores do not establish gender as a cause of anxiety.

Other studies have reported different results. Bensalem (2021) reported no significant difference in foreign language classroom anxiety between Saudi male and female undergraduate students. The variation in findings suggests that gender may interact with proficiency, self-efficacy, classroom practices, cultural expectations, and the type of anxiety measured (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2023; Bensalem, 2021; Okyar, 2023). Therefore, gender is best considered a contextual variable rather than a stable predictor of FNE.

FNE could be linked to the academic year as students gain language experience throughout their program. More practice, greater proficiency, familiarity with classroom speaking, and reduced fear of negative judgment may be associated with increased confidence (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2023). The study by Almusharraf and Bailey (2023) supports this possibility, as years of English study were negatively associated with communication, writing, and evaluation anxiety. Yet, academic achievement does not necessarily lead to a consistent decline in anxiety. Yassin and Razak (2017) found no significant differences among four academic years, and the pattern was not linear.

As pre-service EFL teachers progress through their program, they may encounter more challenging presentations, teaching demonstrations, and practicum evaluations (Li et al., 2023). Foreign language teaching anxiety was found to be higher among those who had completed a practicum (Li et al., 2023). The most prominent source of foreign language teaching anxiety was identified as FNE. Thus, experience may develop competence, whereas increased expectations may maintain evaluative pressure. Although age and academic year may overlap, they are distinct variables. Students of the same age may have different levels of language proficiency and university experience.

2.4. Contact with Native English Speakers

Two types of contact with native English speakers should be considered. Learning from a native English-speaking instructor is a structured, evaluative classroom interaction (Dewaele et al., 2019; Han et al., 2016). Meeting and communicating with native speakers of English outside class is voluntary, informal, and meaning-focused (Guntzviller et al., 2016). They differ in purpose and emotional context, and these types of contact should not be confused.

The influence of instructors' linguistic backgrounds has been investigated, with mixed results. Dewaele et al. (2019) found that learners with teachers who spoke English as an L1 experienced greater enjoyment and lower classroom anxiety. Nevertheless, teacher characteristics explained little variation in anxiety, whereas friendliness, strictness, and classroom language use were important. Han et al. (2016) found that Turkish students reported no difference in speaking anxiety regardless of whether they were taught by native or non-native English-speaking teachers. Therefore, one cannot assume that simply taking a course with a native English-speaking instructor reduces FNE. Support, feedback and classroom climate may be more important than the linguistic background of the EFL/ESL teacher (Dewaele et al., 2019).

Communicating outside the classroom provides learners with opportunities to apply their knowledge in authentic interactions (Guntzviller et al., 2016; Jin & Lee, 2022). Effective interactions can enhance perceived competence and confidence, which are strongly associated with communication readiness. However, frequency does not indicate whether contact is supportive, meaningful, extensive, or stressful. A long conversation and an awkward exchange represent different forms of contact, yet each may be counted as a single instance. The quantity and quality of contact may therefore have different relationships with anxiety. In fact, a higher amount of authentic interaction does not automatically lead to lower anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2008). Supportiveness might be particularly important. Positive feedback and a friendly, supportive atmosphere decrease the evaluative threat of speaking (Novak, 2021). The duration of interaction may also be important. Learners may not experience the same effect from a short conversation as from a long discussion. The valence of feedback seems to matter as well. Positive feedback received by learners can reduce anxiety and increase confidence (Martin & Valdivia, 2017). In addition, teacher feedback practices have been associated with substantial reductions in foreign language anxiety (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021).

Moreover, the relationship may be bidirectional, as repeated positive interactions over time may reduce uncertainty and render future encounters less threatening (Guntzviller et al., 2016; Jin & Lee, 2022). A high level of contact does not necessarily indicate low anxiety. Curvilinear patterns have been observed in cultural settings (Guntzviller et al., 2016). Low anxiety and high perceived competence may encourage learners to engage more frequently in interaction, whereas high anxiety may discourage interaction (Jin & Lee, 2022). Therefore, cross-sectional data should be interpreted as evidence of associations rather than evidence that contact directly reduces FNE.

2.5. Research Gap

While fear of negative evaluation has been addressed in Turkish EFL research, it has been approached as a source or correlate of speaking and teaching anxiety rather than examined as the primary focus among pre-service teachers (Aydin, 2016; Okyar, 2023). Other studies have examined instructor linguistic background and speaking anxiety without combining this experience with learners' communication frequency outside class (Han et al., 2016). Consequently, limited evidence explains how FNE among pre-service EFL teachers varies across demographic and experiential conditions within the Turkish teacher-education context. The present study addresses this gap by examining gender, academic year, and contact with native English speakers together. It distinguishes taking a course from a native English-speaking instructor from communicating with native English speakers outside class. In this way, the study identifies participants' FNE level, then tests differences according to gender and academic year, and finally examines whether the two forms of contact are associated with FNE.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model guiding the present study. Fear of negative evaluation, measured with the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, was treated as the outcome of interest, and four learner-related variables were hypothesized to relate to it: gender, academic year, experience with a native English-speaking instructor, and the frequency of out-of-class contact with native speakers. These variables were selected in line with the social-evaluative nature of FNE, which is a distinct evaluative concern that may contribute to speaking anxiety rather than being identical to it (Okyar, 2023). The model also suggests that the amount of out-of-class contact may not be a good predictor of the quality of the contact experienced by learners, because a greater amount of authentic interaction does not necessarily lead to less anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2008). However, the duration and positive, supportive nature of contact may affect the relationship between contact and FNE (Martin & Valdivia, 2017; Novak, 2021; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). The qualitative data comprised 21 interviews and 13 written reports. These data contextualized the statistical findings by examining how learners experienced FNE in real classrooms.

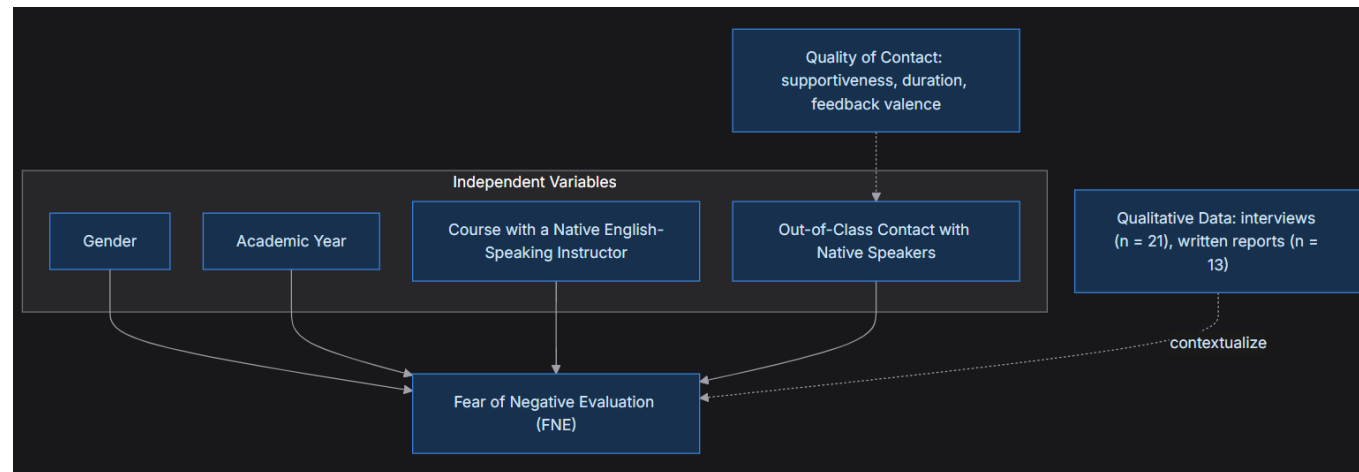


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the hypothesized relationships between learner and experiential variables and fear of negative evaluation. Solid arrows indicate hypothesized direct relationships; dashed lines indicate moderating or contextualizing relationships.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative-dominant mixed-methods design consisting of a cross-sectional survey and supplementary semi-structured interviews. The quantitative component described pre-service EFL teachers' fear of negative evaluation (FNE) and examined differences and associations across selected

variables. The interviews provided contextual explanations of participants' evaluative concerns while speaking English. The two forms of evidence were integrated during interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). No variables were manipulated; therefore, the findings represent differences and associations rather than causal relationships.

3.2. Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the English Language Teaching programme of a Turkish state university. Of the accessible population of 425 students, 355 volunteered for the survey. The sample included 52 preparatory-class, 107 first-year, 106 second-year, 47 third-year, and 43 fourth-year students. Of these participants, 276 were female and 79 were male. Because the sample was drawn from a single English Language Teaching programme at one Turkish state university, the findings are context-specific and should be generalized to other institutions or educational settings only with caution. The marked imbalance between female ($n = 276$) and male ($n = 79$) participants should also be kept in mind when interpreting the gender comparisons reported later in this study.

Participants' ages were categorized as 18 or younger ($n = 51$), 19 ($n = 58$), 20 ($n = 67$), 21 ($n = 69$), 22 ($n = 58$), or 23 and older ($n = 52$). Age was used only descriptively because it largely overlapped with academic year. Regarding contact with native English speakers, 328 participants had taken a course taught by a native English-speaking instructor, whereas 27 had not. Outside-class communication was reported as never ($n = 85$), rarely ($n = 152$), sometimes ($n = 88$), usually ($n = 23$), or always ($n = 7$).

The qualitative component included 21 volunteers from the same programme, comprising 11 female learners and 10 male learners. To protect confidentiality, they were assigned codes IP01-IP21.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative data was gathered by using a background questionnaire and the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE; Leary, 1983). The background survey asked participants to give information about their gender, age, year of study, whether they had taken a course with a native English-speaking teacher, and how often they talked to native English speakers outside of class.

The BFNE was developed as a shorter version of the original 30-item scale developed by Watson and Friend (1969). It consists of 12 items rated on a five-point Likert-type scale. Total scores range from 12 to 60, with higher scores indicating stronger FNE. Items 2, 4, 7, and 10 were reverse-scored. Leary (1983) reported a .96 correlation between the brief and original scales. The Turkish adaptation produced satisfactory internal consistency, Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$ (Çetin et al., 2010). In the present study, the Turkish version of the BFNE adapted by Çetin et al. (2010) was administered. The scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

Qualitative data were collected through nine semi-structured interview questions addressing speaking difficulties, sources of anxiety, oral mistakes, peer comparison, teacher and classmate reactions, oral examinations, and anxiety-reduction practices.

3.4. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected throughout one academic year. Participants provided informed consent after receiving information about the study, confidentiality, and withdrawal rights. The questionnaire was administered in paper-and-pencil format. Twenty-one interviews were conducted in English. Each interview lasted

approximately 20 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and returned to participants for confirmation. Thirteen participants responded to the same nine questions in writing. Participants were assigned pseudonyms. Participation was voluntary at all stages.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 18.0, with the statistical significance level set at .05. For the first research question, item means, standard deviations, and the overall mean per item were calculated.

For the second research question, gender differences were examined using an independent-samples *t* test, with Hedges' *g* as the effect size. Academic-year differences were tested using one-way ANOVA, with eta squared as the effect size. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine whether the sample size was adequate for this comparison. With $\alpha = .05$, a target power of .80, and a medium expected effect size ($f = .25$), the analysis required a total sample of [N]; the obtained sample ($N = 355$) [met/exceeded] this requirement, indicating that the comparison was adequately powered to detect a medium effect. No post hoc test was conducted because the omnibus result was not significant.

For the third research question, course experience with a native English-speaking instructor was examined using an independent-samples *t* test and Hedges' *g*. Contact-frequency groups were compared using the Kruskal-Wallis test, with epsilon squared as the effect size. No pairwise post hoc comparisons were conducted; therefore, the significant result was interpreted only as an overall group difference.

Interview transcripts and written reports were divided into meaningful units and organized into recurring themes. Only FNE-related themes were retained. Percentages were reported for the 13 written reports only when denominators were verifiable. Pseudonymized extracts illustrated the themes, which were integrated with the quantitative findings during interpretation.

4. Findings

This section presents the quantitative findings in the order of the three research questions, followed by supplementary qualitative findings. First, descriptive statistics were used to determine the overall level of fear of negative evaluation among the pre-service EFL teachers. Second, total BFNE scores were compared according to gender and academic year using an independent-samples *t* test and one-way ANOVA. Third, contact with native English speakers was examined in terms of both taking a course taught by a native English-speaking instructor and the frequency of communication outside class. An independent-samples *t* test and a Kruskal-Wallis test were used for these comparisons, respectively. Statistical significance was set at .05, and effect sizes are reported where available. Finally, the interviews with 21 participants and written reports from 13 participants were analysed to identify FNE-related themes. These qualitative findings are included to provide context for and complement the quantitative findings, and they are not intended to establish differences among demographic groups or causal relationships.

4.1. Overall Level of Fear of Negative Evaluation

Descriptive statistics for the individual items and the overall mean of the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale were calculated in response to the first research question. Means and standard deviations for the 12 items are given in Table 2. The overall mean per item was 3.01 ($SD = .79$) on a 5-point response scale. This score was close to the theoretical midpoint of 3.00. This suggested that responses of participants were generally clustered around the midpoint rather than either end of the scale.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics for the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale*

Item	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	I worry about what people will think of me even when I know it does not make any difference.	2.71	1.16
2	I am unconcerned even if I know people are forming an unfavorable impression of me.	3.34	1.21
3	I am frequently afraid of other people noting my shortcomings.	2.61	1.20
4	I rarely worry about what kind of impression I am making on someone.	2.84	1.25
5	I am afraid that others will not approve of me.	2.67	1.21
6	I am afraid that people will find fault with me.	2.64	1.25
7	Other people's opinions of me do not bother me.	3.52	1.26
8	When I am talking to someone, I worry about what they may be thinking about me.	3.00	1.24
9	I am usually worried about what kind of impression I make.	3.17	1.22
10	If I know someone is judging me, it has little effect on me.	3.38	1.16
11	Sometimes I think I am too concerned with what other people think of me.	3.13	1.25
12	I often worry that I will say or do the wrong things.	3.11	1.25
Scale mean per item		3.01	0.79

Note. $N = 355$. Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale. Items 2, 4, 7, and 10 were reverse-scored before the scale scores were calculated. Higher scores indicate greater fear of negative evaluation.

Table 2 displays that the item means ranged from 2.61 to 3.52, and the standard deviations ranged from 1.16 to 1.26. The highest mean was for Item 7, "Other people's opinions of me do not bother me" ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.26$). The second highest mean ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.16$) was for Item 10, "If I know someone is judging me, it has little impact on me." This was followed by Item 2, "I don't care even if I know people are forming an unfavorable impression of me" ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.21$).

The lowest mean score was for Item 3, "I am often afraid that other people will notice my shortcomings" ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.20$). The means for Item 6, "I am afraid that people will find fault with me" ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.25$) and for Item 5, "I am afraid that others will not approve of me" ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.21$) were rather low. The findings reveal that the pre-service EFL teachers' fear of negative evaluation tended to be near the midpoint of the response scale. Thus, the scores of the participants were not clustered at either end of the scale.

4.2. Differences in Fear of Negative Evaluation by Gender and Academic Year

To address the second research question, the participants' fear of negative evaluation scores were compared according to gender and academic year. An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to examine the difference between male and female participants. A one-way analysis of variance was used to determine whether the scores differed across the five academic-year groups. The descriptive and inferential results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Fear of Negative Evaluation Scores by Gender and Academic Year

Comparison and group	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Test	<i>p</i>	Effect
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	79	32.92	8.25	t(353) = 3.81	< .001	g = .49
Female	276	37.04	8.52			
<i>Academic year</i>						
Preparatory class	52	35.06	9.00	F(4, 350) = 1.23	.297	η² = .014
First year	107	36.82	8.33			
Second year	106	36.63	8.26			
Third year	47	36.60	9.28			
Fourth year	43	33.88	8.91			

Note. BFNE = Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *g* = Hedges' *g*; η^2 = eta squared. Higher scores indicate greater fear of negative evaluation.

As shown in Table 3, female participants had a higher mean fear of negative evaluation score ($M = 37.04$, $SD = 8.52$) than male participants ($M = 32.92$, $SD = 8.25$). The independent-samples *t* test showed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(353) = 3.81$, $p < .001$. The effect size was $g = .49$, indicating a difference close to a medium effect. Thus, the female pre-service EFL teachers reported greater fear of negative evaluation than their male counterparts.

The mean scores also varied slightly across academic years. First-year participants had the highest mean score ($M = 36.82$, $SD = 8.33$), followed by second-year ($M = 36.63$, $SD = 8.26$) and third-year participants ($M = 36.60$, $SD = 9.28$). Preparatory-class participants had a mean score of 35.06 ($SD = 9.00$), while fourth-year participants had the lowest mean score ($M = 33.88$, $SD = 8.91$). However, the one-way analysis of variance indicated that these differences were not statistically significant, $F(4, 350) = 1.23$, $p = .297$, $\eta^2 = .014$. Therefore, no post hoc comparisons were required for the overall scale scores.

In response to the second research question, fear of negative evaluation differed significantly according to gender but not according to academic year.

4.3. Relationship Between Contact with Native English Speakers and Fear of Negative Evaluation

To address the third research question, contact with native English speakers was examined through two variables. The first variable concerned whether the participants had taken a course taught by a native English speaker. The second variable concerned how frequently they met and communicated with native

English speakers outside their regular classes. An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to examine course experience, while a Kruskal–Wallis test was used to compare the five contact-frequency groups. Table 4 presents the fear of negative evaluation scores of the participants who had and had not taken a course taught by a native English speaker.

Table 4

Fear of Negative Evaluation by Experience of a Course Taught by a Native English Speaker

Course experience	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Test	<i>p</i>	Effect
Yes	328	36.20	8.66	$t(353) = 0.56$	.574	$g = .11$
No	27	35.22	8.24			

Note. *N* = 355. BFNE = Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *g* = Hedges' *g*. Higher scores indicate greater fear of negative evaluation.

Participants who had taken a course taught by a native English speaker had a slightly higher mean score ($M = 36.20$, $SD = 8.66$) than those who had not taken such a course ($M = 35.22$, $SD = 8.24$). However, the independent-samples *t* test showed that this difference was not statistically significant, $t(353) = 0.56$, $p = .574$. The effect size was also small, $g = .11$. Therefore, taking a course taught by a native English speaker was not significantly associated with the participants' fear of negative evaluation.

The second analysis examined whether fear of negative evaluation differed according to the frequency of meeting and communicating with native English speakers. The mean ranks and Kruskal–Wallis test results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Fear of Negative Evaluation by Frequency of Contact with Native English Speakers

Contact frequency	<i>n</i>	Mean rank	<i>H</i>	<i>p</i>	ε^2
Never	85	201.59	10.32	.035	.018
Rarely	152	179.70			
Sometimes	88	164.27			
Usually	23	134.30			
Always	7	170.86			

Note. *N* = 355. *H* = Kruskal–Wallis test statistic; ε^2 = epsilon-squared effect size. Higher mean ranks indicate higher fear of negative evaluation. Pairwise post hoc comparisons were not conducted because some contact-frequency groups were too small for reliable pairwise comparisons (e.g., the “always” group, $n = 7$).

As shown in Table 5, participants who reported never communicating with native English speakers had the highest mean rank (201.59). This group was followed descriptively by the rarely (179.70), always (170.86), and sometimes (164.27) groups. Participants who reported usually communicating with native English speakers had the lowest mean rank (134.30).

The Kruskal–Wallis test indicated a statistically significant overall difference in fear of negative evaluation across the five contact-frequency groups, $H(4) = 10.32$, $p = .035$, $\epsilon^2 = .018$. However, the effect size was small. Although the mean ranks generally tended to be lower among participants who reported more frequent contact with native English speakers, this pattern was not completely linear. Pairwise post hoc comparisons were not conducted because some contact-frequency groups were too small to yield reliable pairwise results (the “usually” group contained 23 participants and the “always” group only 7). Consequently, it was not possible to determine which specific groups accounted for the overall difference, and the significant omnibus result should be interpreted only as a tentative indication that out-of-class contact frequency is related to fear of negative evaluation, warranting further investigation with a larger sample. The differences between individual contact-frequency groups should therefore be interpreted descriptively and with caution.

In response to the third research question, taking a course taught by a native English speaker was not significantly associated with fear of negative evaluation. In contrast, the frequency of meeting and communicating with native English speakers was associated with a statistically significant but small overall difference in fear of negative evaluation. Nevertheless, the analysis did not determine which specific contact-frequency groups differed significantly from one another, and this finding should therefore be regarded as a tentative indication that warrants further investigation with a larger sample.

4.4. Supplementary Qualitative Findings on Fear of Negative Evaluation

The supplementary qualitative findings provided further insight into how the participants experienced fear of negative evaluation while speaking English. The analysis was based on the interviews with 21 participants, and all findings reported in this section derive from these interview data. To protect confidentiality, the participants were identified using the codes IP01–IP21. Four themes were directly relevant to the present study: fear of committing mistakes and negative assessments, comparison with peers, pressure in evaluative circumstances, and conditions that alleviated anxiety.

A common theme was the fear of making mistakes in front of teachers and other students. Interviewees specifically mentioned problems with pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and word choice. Such problems, they felt, could lead to criticism, misunderstanding, disapproval, or ridicule. IP21 described how negative reactions from teachers and classmates discouraged participation: “*Some of my friends laugh at me . . . so I do not want to speak.*” Similarly, IP09 stated that “*anxiety interfered with the expression of the intended meaning*” and mainly attributed this experience to “*fear of making mistakes in the classroom.*” Such accounts illustrate how oral participation may be constrained by anticipated responses from others.

Another socially evaluative experience was comparison with classmates. Some interviewees used the fluency and accuracy of their peers as a benchmark for evaluating their own speaking ability. While this comparison was motivating for some interviewees, it could also highlight differences in perceived competence. Peer comparison seemed to serve as a source of self-assessment as well as a potential source of evaluative concern.

Oral examinations were described as particularly anxiety-provoking by the interviewees as particularly anxiety-provoking because their performance was directly observed and graded. The pressure stemmed from fears of making mistakes, receiving a low grade, and speaking in front of teachers and classmates. IP14 said, “*I get anxious even when I am prepared in oral exams.*” This suggests that being prepared did not always eliminate anxiety when participants spoke under direct evaluation.

Participants felt more comfortable speaking when teachers and peers responded with tolerance. IP19 pointed out that it was “*normal to make mistakes*” when learning a language and that teachers and classmates were “*reasonably tolerant*.” IP18 also added, “*Classmates and the teacher listened without interruption*.” Interviewees also perceived practices such as preparation, frequent speaking practice, exposure to English-language media, and communication with native English speakers as helpful for their confidence.

Some interviewees perceived their limited contact with native speakers of English as constraining their fluency and pronunciation, and they perceived authentic communication and regular speaking practice as helpful for their confidence. These comments reflect the participants’ perceptions and do not provide evidence that contact directly reduces FNE. The qualitative data do not distinguish between the individual contact-frequency groups. The results indicate that FNE was most often reported in relation to mistakes, peer comparison, public performance, and anticipated judgment by teachers or peers.

5. Discussion

Within the present sample of pre-service EFL teachers at a single Turkish state university, the results indicated that fear of negative evaluation was close to the midpoint of the BFNE scale. FNE differed significantly according to gender, whereas no significant difference was found across academic years. Taking a course with a native English-speaking teacher was not associated with FNE, whereas the frequency of out-of-class contact had a small yet statistically significant overall association. Qualitative findings contextualized these patterns by linking anxiety to mistakes, comparison with peers, oral exams, and anticipated judgment.

A mean near the midpoint does not indicate an absence of difficulty. However, it suggests that evaluative concerns were present and varied across participants and situations. The interviews indicated that FNE was more evident when students were speaking in public, responding with some uncertainty, or performing for a grade. A similar finding was reported by Okyar (2023). Turkish EFL learners with FNE experienced higher speaking anxiety and lower self-perceptions of their speaking ability. Research on pre-service teachers has linked anxiety to a number of common concerns. In particular, these include fear of making mistakes, low confidence, lack of speaking practice, and concern about being evaluated by others (Haroud et al., 2025). However, consistent with the conceptual distinction drawn in the Introduction, FNE is not interchangeable with general foreign language anxiety or speaking anxiety. It is a distinct social-evaluative concern, apprehension about being judged negatively by others, involving distress over negative judgments and avoidance of evaluative situations (Pastor & Miller, 2019), that can contribute to these broader forms of anxiety, not a component of speaking anxiety itself (Okyar, 2023). In Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope’s model, such evaluative concerns appear as one of three performance-related anxieties, alongside communication apprehension and test anxiety (Dewaele, 2017; Papi & Khajavy, 2023). FNE is particularly relevant to pre-service teachers, as their future work will involve public speaking, giving instructions, and responding to learners.

Female participants scored significantly higher on FNE than male participants, with a medium effect size ($g = .49$). According to Cohen’s (1988) conventions, effect sizes around .50 represent a medium effect; $g = .49$ should therefore be interpreted as a medium effect rather than one that merely approaches medium. This finding is consistent with Okyar’s (2023) finding of higher speaking anxiety among female Turkish EFL learners and more recent evidence that female university students reported higher FNE than male students (Alrashidi & Alenezy, 2026). The results regarding gender are, however, inconsistent. For example, no gender difference was found in classroom anxiety by Bensalem (2019). The present finding may be a product of self-report tendencies, sensitivity to social evaluation, or culturally shaped performance

expectations, but these were not investigated. This should not be taken as support for a biological or innate gender difference. The difference observed may also have been inflated or distorted by the unequal number of participants in each group (276 women and 79 men). With such unbalanced subsamples, the comparison is weighted heavily by the characteristics of the larger group, and the estimated effect size may not be indicative of the true magnitude of the gender difference in the wider population. Therefore, the gender difference observed in this study should be interpreted as a feature of the present sample and not as an indication of a general trend, and caution should be exercised when generalizing beyond the present scope.

There were no significant differences in FNE across academic years, and the effect size was small. The descriptive mean was lowest among the third-year students. However, this does not mean that, as learners become more experienced, they stop feeling anxious. This is in line with the study by Yassin and Razak (2017), who concluded no significant difference in foreign language anxiety by year of study. More language experience could mean more confidence; however, new courses, teaching demonstrations, oral exam and professional demands could also bring evaluative pressures. Because the data are cross-sectional, differences between cohorts cannot be interpreted as development within individuals over time. The two contact measures produced different results. Taking a course taught by a native English speaker was not related to FNE, and the effect was very small. Thus, within this context, interaction quality, active participation, and feedback practices may be more important than the nativeness of the instructor. Teacher characteristics and classroom climate have been associated with learners' anxiety and enjoyment (Dewaele et al., 2019). Caution is also needed in interpretation because only 27 participants had not taken such a course.

However, the frequency of out-of-class communication was associated with a small but statistically significant overall difference in FNE, $H(4) = 10.32$, $p = .035$. The "never" group had the highest mean rank, whereas the "usually" group had the lowest mean rank, suggesting that more frequent contact may be related to less evaluative concern. However, the pattern was not perfectly linear. Because some contact-frequency groups were very small, the "always" group contained only seven participants and the "usually" group only 23, pairwise post hoc comparisons were not conducted, as such comparisons would not have been sufficiently reliable. Consequently, the significant omnibus result cannot identify which specific pairs of groups differ, and it should be interpreted only as a tentative indication that out-of-class contact frequency is related to FNE, warranting further investigation with a larger sample. In addition, the direction of the association is not clear either. Contact may increase confidence, while less anxious students may be more likely to initiate contact. Previous studies suggest that the relationship between out-of-class language use and communication anxiety may not be linear. This interpretation is consistent with participants' perceptions that authentic communication increased their confidence; however, again, it does not establish causation.

The findings tentatively support teacher education practices that reduce the social risks of speaking within the scope of this study. Pair and small-group work, rehearsal prior to public presentations, gradual progression to presentations, and normalization of errors can promote safer participation. Feedback should be positive and focused on meaning and development. Ridicule should not be normalized in classrooms (Köroğlu & Kayaoğlu, 2022). Recent work also identifies useful strategies such as collaboration, gradual exposure, preparation, peer support, and constructive reactions to errors (Attia & Algazo, 2025; Haroud et al., 2025). Programs may also provide structured opportunities for online or community engagement. Frequency of contact, however, should not be the only criterion; programs need to scaffold such opportunities and assess the quality of engagement. Such practices are especially relevant for pre-service teachers, whose own learning experiences may affect their ability to create emotionally supportive classroom environments for their students.

6. Conclusion

Within the present sample of pre-service EFL teachers at a single Turkish state university, the present study investigated the overall level of fear of negative evaluation, gender and year of study differences, and the relationship between contact with native English speakers and fear of negative evaluation. Results indicated that, on average, the participants' fear of negative evaluation was near the midpoint of the scale. Thus, evaluative concern was present without being concentrated at either the low or high end of the scale. The qualitative data also revealed that this concern was more prominent in situations involving speaking errors, peer comparison, oral tests, and anticipated evaluation by teachers or peers.

Regarding the second research question, female participants reported higher fear of negative evaluation than male participants. However, fear of negative evaluation did not differ according to academic year. Progress through the teacher-education programme was therefore not related to a clear difference in participants' overall evaluative concern. Although students in later years may have gained more speaking and classroom-performance experience, the academic-year groups did not differ significantly in this study.

The findings concerning contact with native English speakers differed according to the type of contact. Taking a course taught by a native English-speaking instructor was not associated with fear of negative evaluation. In contrast, the frequency of meeting and communicating with native English speakers outside class was associated with an overall difference. Nevertheless, this association was small, did not follow a fully consistent pattern, and did not identify which contact groups differed. The result should therefore be interpreted as an association rather than evidence that contact reduced fear of negative evaluation. The qualitative accounts indicated that participants nevertheless viewed authentic communication and regular speaking practice as helpful for confidence.

Within the scope of this study, the results offer tentative implications for English teacher education in similar contexts. Programs should systematically provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop confidence in speaking within supportive contexts. Oral tasks can be introduced gradually, starting with pair and small-group interaction and progressing to whole-class presentations, teaching demonstrations, and assessed speaking. Clear criteria, adequate preparation, constructive feedback, and opportunities to refine a performance can reduce evaluative pressure. Programs should promote positive peer interaction and discourage teasing and negative responses to mistakes. Guided conversations, international online exchanges, guest speakers, and collaborative projects can provide opportunities for meaningful communication in English. These opportunities should emphasize meaningful interaction and psychological safety rather than merely the occurrence of contact.

A number of limitations should be noted. Recruitment from a single English Language Teaching programme at one Turkish state university limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutions and educational settings. This imbalance may have affected the gender comparison as the sample included substantially more female learners ($n = 276$) than male learners ($n = 79$). The smaller male subsample results in less precise estimates for that group, and the observed difference may have been inflated or distorted by the imbalance. Thus, the gender-related findings should be interpreted with caution and should not be generalized beyond the present context. The cross-sectional design was appropriate for capturing experiences at one point in time but did not demonstrate changes in experiences during teacher education. Individual response tendencies may also affect the self-report scale. The study examined whether contact occurred and the frequency thereof. But it did not look at the quality or duration or purpose or emotional nature of contact. The number of participants in some groups of contact frequency was small, which limited the stability of comparisons involving these groups. Finally, differences and associations were searched. Hence, no causal inferences can be made. Future research with multi-institutional designs, more balanced

gender samples, longitudinal approaches, and more nuanced measures of communication experiences may help to overcome these limitations.

Clarification: This study is derived from the author's doctoral dissertation, completed at Erzurum Atatürk University.

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