Proficient Speakers of English as a Foreign Language: A Focus-Group Study

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Abstract

Although English is the de facto language of communication across nations in today's world, a limited number of foreign language learners are able to communicate well in English and perceive themselves as competent speakers. Investigating traits of proficient speakers of English and understanding the reasons behind their speaking skills can guide language teachers in creating supportive language learning contexts for their students. This study explores what proficient speakers of English do to gain success in speaking, and it sheds light on how to improve speaking skills in language learning. The study examines what factors play an important role in the language development of proficient speakers of English. Sixteen English as a foreign language (EFL) students who had the highest scores on English speaking tests volunteered for this study; four focus groups were created with four participants in each group. Content analysis results indicate that contextual factors – including self-practice, teacher factor, experience abroad, Turkish context, out-of-class technology use, and affective factors, including motivation and anxiety – are important for speaking enhancement. Findings clearly reveal that language learning should go beyond the confines of the school and be supported with technology-enhanced extracurricular exercises in EFL contexts. Moreover, what motivates language learners to study English and how they feel while speaking should be considered while teaching or planning their speaking lessons.

Keywords: speaking skills, proficient speakers, contextual factors, motivation, anxiety

With two billion-plus speakers, including native and non-native speakers with different competencies, the English language has become a fundamental need for individuals in this globalizing world (Crystal, 2008; Ethnologue, 2019; Graddol, 2006). As a result, the number of English as a foreign or second language speakers (L2) is growing (Crystal, 2008). Since knowing a language is equated with speaking that language fluently, speaking English has become a primary goal for most L2 learners. However, a limited number of English learners can be categorized as competent speakers of the language. According to the recent EF English Proficiency Index (English First, 2019), only 14 countries have a very high proficiency index and many countries (30) fall into the shallow proficiency index among 100 non-English speaking countries under investigation for adult English proficiency with standardized tests. It is commonly accepted that many EFL instruction programs strive to provide appropriate conditions for learners to gain high proficiency in English. However, despite the importance of fluent spoken language, scant research attention has been given to strategies that can be employed to enhance speaking (Pawlak, 2018). With its specific focus on the experiences of proficient speakers in achieving success, this study used a qualitative approach to understand the nature of those proficient speakers and aimed to provide rich data on the influential factors about speaking enhancement.

Literature Review

Mastery of speaking in another language is a complex process: the speaker must learn a variety of skills including both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, and should be able to conduct a free-flowing conversation (Dincer, 2017; Richards, 2008; Shumin, 2002; Tarone, 2005; Zhang & Head, 2009). A number of factors affecting speakers' oral performance, including maturation constraints (i.e., age), aural medium factors (i.e., listening skills), sociocultural factors (i.e., cultural elements), and affective factors (i.e., L2 anxiety, L2 motivation, self-esteem, confidence) can be listed in addition to linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence (Kawai, 2008; Shumin, 2002). With its complex nature hindering proficiency, spoken English is arduous; language learners must spend significant time and effort on mastery (Dincer, 2017; Kawai, 2008). Spoken English is also a skill in high demand, as knowing a language is frequently equated with speaking a language at a communication level (Pawlak, 2018). Most learners in today's globalized world study English to obtain speaking proficiency; it is considered the most demanding among the four main language skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking (Dincer, 2017; Zhang & Head, 2009). Although speaking is the most challenging skill, most English language learners have limited opportunities to practice the language outside the classroom, despite today's technological advances (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2013; Kawai, 2008; Pawlak, 2014, 2018; Ruixue, Zejun, & Yijing, 2012). Teaching the spoken language has long been a challenge for EFL teachers because some national exams neglect communicative competence (Ruixue et al., 2012). As limited numbers of students can conduct a conversation in English at the desired level, a proficient speaker may be perceived as a privileged person in society (Dincer, 2017). Additionally, success in oral communication has always been the ultimate goal for language learners (Dincer, 2017; Pawlak, 2018).

How one successfully learns a language has been of great interest in the L2 research domain, and a list of shared traits of these learners can be found in the literature (Brown, 2001; Griffiths, 2015; Reiss, 1985; Rubin, 1975; Takeuchi, 2003). Among those shared features, linguistic mastery of English and oral communication skills is listed. However, specific details regarding the characteristics of advanced speakers of English have gained little attention (Pawlak, 2018). In this limited research, Takeuchi (2003) ascertained the strategies of successful language learners in terms of language sub-skills by investigating the experiences of Japanese EFL

learners. According to Takeuchi (2003), proficient language learners develop their speaking skills by memorizing some basic sentences and reciting them repeatedly. They also emphasize accuracy more than fluency. In another study (Takeuchi, 2003, cited in Kawai, 2008), Takeuchi investigated language learning development of proficient English speakers from different vocations, including professors and simultaneous interpreters, and listed some strategies for mastery of speaking. Similar to his previous research, he found that memorizing formulaic expressions, practicing listening using dictation, engaging in read-aloud activities, utilizing context and multimedia for vocabulary enhancement, conducting intensive self-study, and finding opportunities to talk with native speakers are commonly employed strategies for these learners.

In her two-step action-research, Kawai (2008) first investigated the role of task-based strategy instruction with an electronic chat program in students' speaking performance with the idea that it might ease intimidation in face-to-face interaction. Later, she gathered the viewpoints of two proficient speakers of English about the class discussion activities. She found that the use of electronic chat programs can be useful for reserved learners to let them practice English without fear of making mistakes and appearing foolish. The proficient speakers also suggested that reading aloud, singing songs, making comments while watching TV, speaking with natives, and simulating conversation with peers are helpful for reducing anxiety and building confidence in their speaking skills. They also pointed to precautionary measures in communication breakdowns and learning from their failures as speaking-enhancement strategies.

Marzec-Stawiarska (2015) investigated the relationship between anxiety and speaking proficiency in advanced learners of English as the literature on this relationship is not unanimous. She found that although language learners may have an adequate level of English proficiency, they experience stress and worry in a speaking context. They are anxious about their fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and the content of their oral performances and are afraid of talking with native speakers. In another study, Pawlak (2015) investigated the communication strategies of advanced learners and found that students use non-verbal strategies, negotiation for meaning, social affective strategies, accuracy-oriented strategies, and fluency-oriented strategies in their communication. These learners attempt to make eye contact when they talk, provide examples if the listener does not understand what they say, enjoy the conversation, correct themselves when they notice that they make a mistake, and attempt to speak clearly and loudly to make themselves understood. He also found that learners' answers are quite varied; for example, "I give up when I can't make myself understood," "I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence," and "I ask other people to help when I can't communicate well."

In a more recent study, Lee and Heinz (2016) grouped the effective and ineffective strategies of advanced learners for speaking with unstructured essays. In parallel to Takeuchi's findings (2003), they discovered that memorization and repetition activities are effective for the development of speaking skills. Students repeatedly practice language, memorize English expressions and collocations and incorporate them into their conversation, read aloud, listen to English, practice creative writing, increase their exposure to English, and mimic native speakers. They also said passive activities such as simply listening to native speakers, watching them, or reading books without studying them and placing emphasis on grammar are not effective for them. In his follow-up study, Pawlak (2018) investigated the speaking strategies that advanced learners of English used before, during, and after the performance of two communication-based tasks in pairs. According to the written responses of students, learners

most frequently used metacognitive strategies in all stages of task performance. Specifically, they engaged in planning their contribution in terms of searching for details for content, finding appropriate vocabulary, monitoring their performance concerning language-related issues, and paying attention to their partner's speech. They also used social strategies such as cooperation, asking for clarification, or verification in all stages of task performance.

Although relevant literature is somewhat overlapping in terms of speaking enhancement activities, it offers various strategies based on individual success stories and teacher-assigned, task-based communication activities. The literature also includes semi-structured, question-based written answers of learners with a limited focus on out-of-class experience. Focus-group interviews are advised in literature for a more thorough understanding of strategies employed by a specific group of students (Chamot, 2004). Additionally, in today's digital era, it is undeniable that successful language learning is not limited to in-class activities; out-of-class activities have a significant impact on language learning (Lai, 2017). However, many questions about how proficient language learners develop their speaking skills remain to be unanswered, and there is a call for more research with successful learners to uncover experience-based working suggestions for enhancement of speaking skills (Dincer, 2017; Kawai, 2008; Lee & Heinz, 2016; Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009; Pawlak, 2018). To this end, gaining an understanding of proficient learners' successful journeys might shed light on the improvement of speaking skills in language learning for learners and provide pedagogical insights for language teachers.

Aim of the study

Given the limitations of literature and the scarcity of research on this subject, this study aims to explore how high achievers succeeded in their speaking proficiency and which factors played a role in their achievement with a qualitative focus-study approach. The study answers the following research question: What are the factors that contribute to the success of proficient speakers of English as a foreign language?

Method

Research Design

This study was conducted as a qualitative case-study approach for an in-depth systematic examination of a case, subject, or study group within its real-life context (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Different designs of case studies can be found in the literature (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). For a holistic understanding of the study phenomenon, this study adopted Yin's (2009) single-case design, which focuses on an extreme group (i.e., advanced learners' speaking English) that was relatively under-researched in L2 literature. Therefore, a focus-group discussion data-collection strategy was employed for an in-depth understanding of proficient speakers' viewpoints.

Study Group

Sixteen advanced learners of English (including 10 males) participated in the study. They are the freshman students in the English Language and Literature Department. Their proficiency is expected to be somewhere between B2 and C1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In their first year, they enroll in skill-based language courses – such as advanced writing skills, reading skills, speaking skills, and listening skills – as well as some courses in their native tongue. They were recruited with a purposive sample strategy, extreme case sampling. According to Cohen et al. (2018), with this strategy, participants are selected because of their extreme characteristics within the group to provide a

clear understanding of the central phenomenon. The students are high achievers in four advanced learners' speaking classes (with a total enrollment of 120 students) and were chosen for the study group based on their speaking exam scores (ranging from 90 to 96 out of 100) and the personal opinion of the course instructor. A total of 20 students were invited to participate in the study and 16 of them volunteered to do so. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years of age ($M = 19.31$; $SD = 1.25$). According to self-reports, they had more than seven years of experience in English ($M = 7.38$; $SD = 2.16$). Three students had traveled to English-speaking countries for a few months. Only six students know a foreign language other than English but at a beginner level.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure
As a data-collection methodology, a focus-group interview was chosen for an in-depth investigation of learners. According to Lew, Yang, and Harklau (2018), this data-collection strategy is one of the least-used approaches and limited research exists on qualitative focus-group interviews in L2. In this method, participants discuss a topic that is determined by the moderator, and reliance is given to the interaction within the group (Cohen et al., 2018). In focus groups, participants interact with each other and work together on the topic at hand. A focus group differs from a straightforward interview, which relies heavily on the researcher's agenda and provides more data than individual interviews (Morgan, 1996). As the interaction within the group is crucial for data and outcomes, the researcher should put much importance on the creation of the groups and the role of the facilitator or moderator of the discussion (Cohen et al., 2018). According to Morgan (1996), group size and the moderator's involvement depend on the goals of the research.

In this study, the primary goal was to generate significant data on the characteristics of proficient speakers within an anxiety-free context. Four focus groups with four students in each were created so as to provide adequate speaking time for students and moderators involved in the lightly structured discussion. The participants were first informed about the study, their anonymity, and their right to withdraw anytime during the interview. After their consent was secured, each participant completed a short questionnaire about their demographic details and English learning experience. Then, they were invited to a focus-group session at their convenience. The second researcher of the study served as the moderator of the sessions, following an interview protocol and taking some field notes. Each session began with an introduction of the participants, continued with discussion of some semi-structured questions, and concluded with a summary of key issues by the researcher. In discussions, students were free to enter and add their remarks after others had spoken. Additionally, they were asked whether they wanted to add any information to the concluding remarks. The sessions were in English and audio-recorded. The average interview session lasted 18 minutes.

For trustworthiness of the study, four commonly cited approaches – credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability – were considered in the data-collection analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Audio-recorded data was transcribed first for analysis and was verified by the researchers. Qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify patterns that emerged and to build relations among the patterns by the researchers. In this process, researchers first independently worked on creating initial codes in the raw data analysis, step by step, following the procedure of the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). They later worked together to group the codes after discussions. After finalizing the creation of groups and deciding the main themes, a third researcher's opinion about the groups was taken concerning the final themes with a diagram of relationships. For the member check, the diagram of relationships was sent to the participants for verification; all students agreed on

the findings without adding any major changes. In the presentation of the analysis, the main categories were illustrated with figures. The categories with sub-themes were supported with sample student excerpts. In this manner, numbers indicate interview sessions and letters were used to distinguish participants (i.e., 1-A = first interview, first participant; 4-D = fourth interview, fourth participant).

Findings

Two main categories emerged from the focus-group interview sessions. Both contextual and affective factors are important in enhancing speaking skills and gaining proficiency. These factors and their sub-themes are presented, respectively.

Contextual Factors
The first category, named "contextual factors," has five themes: self, school, abroad, country, and technology. These themes also have sub-sub-categories and codes. The details are provided in Figure 1.
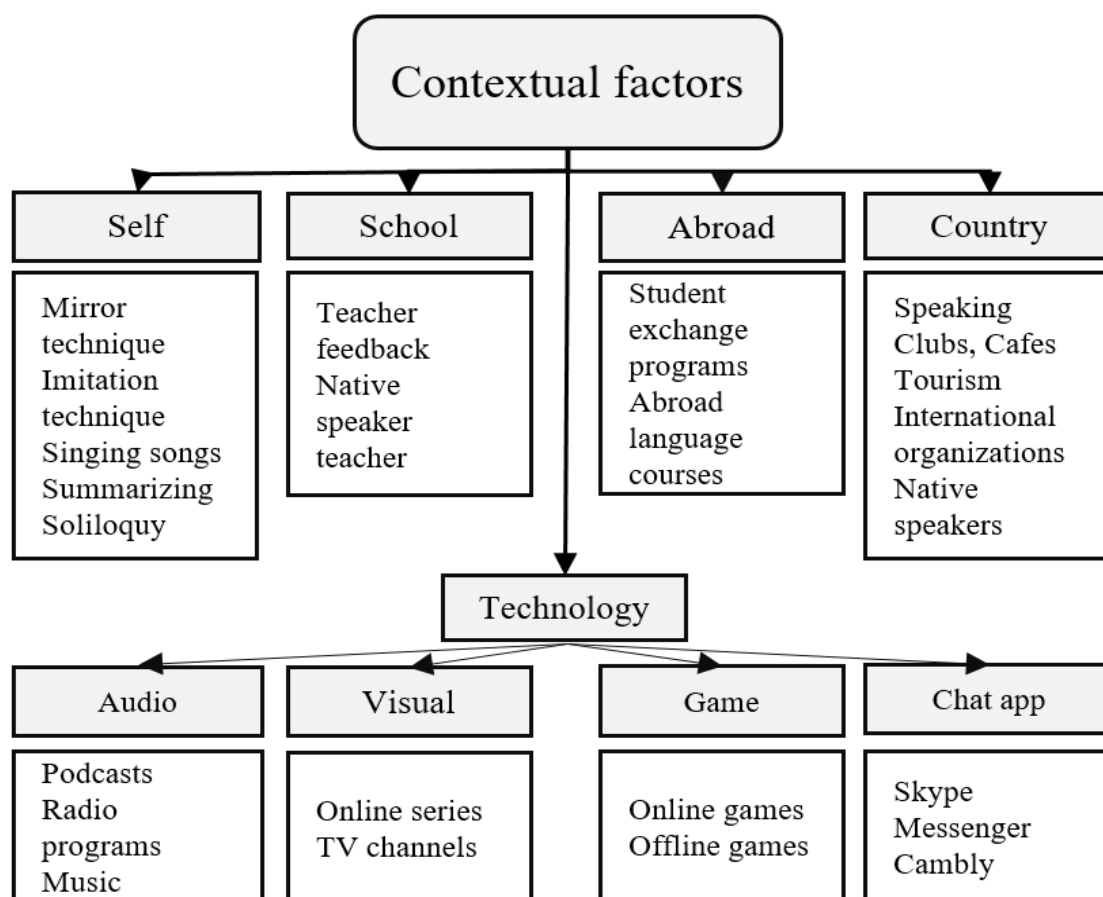

Figure 1: Contextual factors to superiority in speaking English

Self as the first theme in the figure expresses students' self-initiated strategies for speaking enhancement. Students stated that they attempt to improve their speaking skills with self-practice techniques. For instance, they watch themselves while speaking in the mirror and imitate the speech of some well-known native speakers. They also said they use English a great deal, even if they have limited opportunity to practice with someone. They also love English songs and recite those songs as well. They summarize aloud in English what they have listened

to or watched, and they imagine a situation and talk to themselves in that situation in English when they are alone. Emphasizing these issues, student 4-A said: "*There are not enough chances to practice English with natives, so I talk to myself and summarize the videos I watch aloud.*" Other students agreed with this statement and shared their own similar learning experiences via self-talking.

The second theme, school, included language teacher feedback and the importance of a native-speaker teacher. The theme demonstrated that the teacher's being a native speaker of English has a positive impact on students and that teacher feedback is important in the development of speaking skills. Since the students have a limited opportunity to practice English with native speakers in daily life, to speak with a native-speaker teacher and be understood by the teacher gave students additional motivation. Moreover, the students highlighted the teacher's role in language learning and said that positive feedback about their speaking skills plays a significant role in their willingness to practice speaking. Emphasizing the role of teacher feedback in language development, student 1-B said: "*Teachers' feedback motivates me to develop my skills. Actually, it is the most motivating thing. I can tell every student gives a lot of importance to teachers' comments.*" The constructive feedback given by teachers seems to constitute an essential part of teaching strategies.

The third theme is related to experience abroad. One of the learners said she traveled to England to take English language courses. However, this type of learning activity is quite expensive and is not common among students who enroll in state universities. Instead, most students gain experience in a foreign country through exchange programs such as Erasmus, Grundtvig, and the European Voluntary Service (EVS). In fact, the number of students who participate in exchanges has grown exponentially in recent years. One of the former exchange students, 2-D, shared his experiences as, "*In my hometown, you cannot see tourists, so I went to Europe with a Comenius project and I made friends there. I occasionally talk to them on the internet.*"

The fourth theme, country, signifies home country experience and is directly linked to the English-speaking context in Turkey. Some learners are fortunate to have native speakers in the neighborhood, such as brides from England or retired English neighbors. They also seize the opportunity to attend English clubs and participate in discussions in English-speaking cafés. Some learners also become volunteers at international organizations such as the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF). They take advantage of significant speaking practice time during the competitions and communicate on the Internet with the friends they have made during these events. Some learners, especially those who live near tourist attractions, have taken jobs that involve speaking practice. Student 2-A said, "*I worked as a tour guide in Bursa (a historical Turkish city); I made many foreign friends, I speak to them on Skype whenever I get the chance.*"

The fifth and last theme, technology, has a relatively strong influence on speaking development. To meet their need for practice, learners said they utilize audio and audio-visual materials, make use of chat apps, and play video games. Downloadable podcasts on language-learning websites, radio programs, and foreign music are popular audio files for listening practice. Online television series and English television channels are two popular audio-visual sources for language development. Student 3-C argued that watching television not only develops one's language skills but also one's general knowledge: "*By watching TV series, you do not only learn a language but also their culture, social life, and movements (body language).*" Indeed, communication is both verbal and non-verbal. The role of video games in improving speaking skills is arguably one of the most-discussed issues in the L2 domain. Some

learners said they developed their speaking skills by playing online games in which they speak with players around the world and single-player games that require English competency to understand the tasks assigned in the game. Student 2-B highlighted the contributions of playing computer games by saying, "*I began to play computer games not for fun but for language. I owe a lot to games in which you need to talk just like in real life.*" Some video games enable players to create their own characters or avatars and to live and speak in a simulated world. Chat apps such as Skype and Facebook Messenger are used for chat and video calls. Cambly, an app for practicing English with native English speakers over video chat, and similar applications that enable learners to have a video call for speaking practice are becoming popular. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram make it possible for users to make friends around the globe. Thanks to these social networking sites, learners are able to keep in touch with people they meet in real-life settings such as tourism.

Affective Factors
The second category addressed "affective factors" in speaking enhancement. It examines what motivates students to improve their speaking skills and how they feel when they begin communicating with others in English.
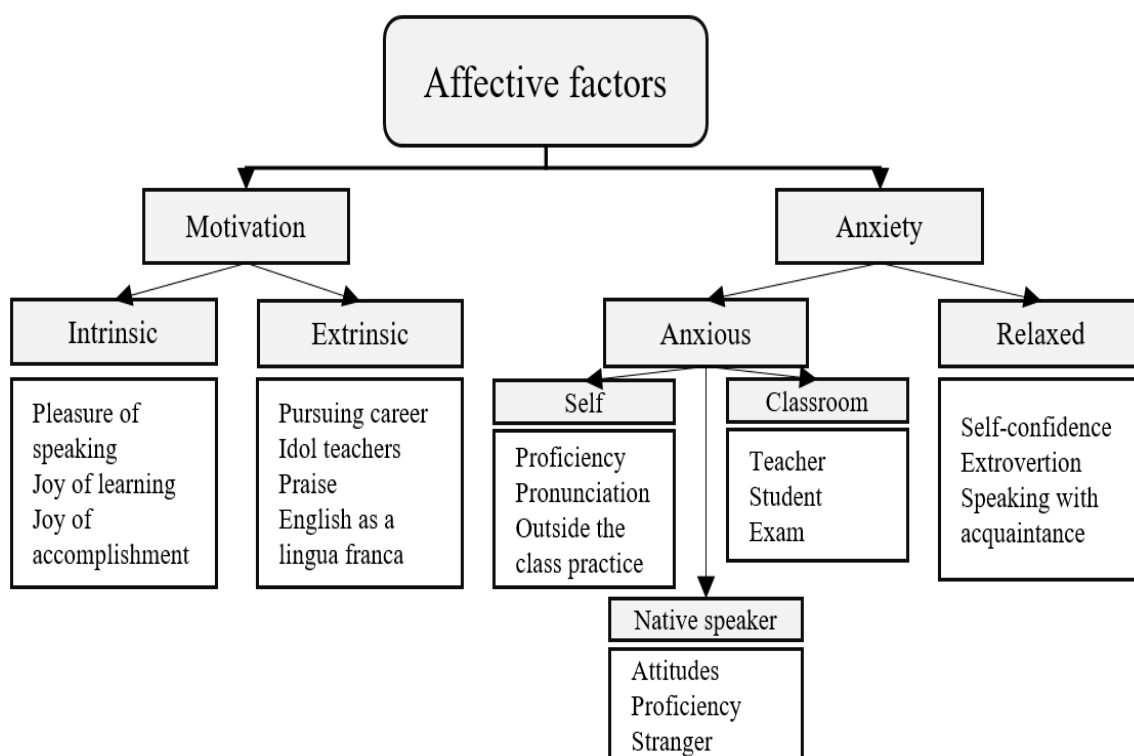

Figure 2: Affective factors to superiority in speaking English

Codes relating to the students' motivation to speak English were collected under two sub-themes: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The first sub-theme, intrinsic motivation, is a driving force for many learners to develop their speaking skills. Intrinsic motivation reveals itself in various ways. Some learners say they have fun while talking in English. Those students use mirror techniques, or they talk to themselves when they are unable to find native speakers with whom to practice. Other learners enjoy listening to songs or podcasts and watching television series or movies in English. One student described the fun he has when watching and understanding television without any subtitles. Understanding native speakers in real-life

conversations and forming good conversations provide a significant motivational boost. Other learners become motivated when they understand native speakers well and are able to express themselves in English. Emphasizing the connection between the joy of accomplishment and intrinsic motivation, student 3-D said, "*I didn't understand native speakers in the past, now I can; that motivates me.*"

The second sub-theme explores extrinsic motivation, which pushes students to develop their speaking skills. Although students have reached an acceptable level of spoken skill, they continue to develop their skills so they can pursue a career in English teaching. Some learners say they want to be just like their idol teachers, who have native-like proficiency in speaking. Such learners became more motivated when they spoke to their teachers and earned praise. Their motivation was fueled by teacher feedback. Positive teacher feedback is highly valued by most language learners, as it makes them feel more confident. To express that feeling of motivation and self-confidence, learner 4-C said, "*I get motivated when my teacher states that I am in the right direction. Once, one of my teachers said, 'I hope one day we will work together'.*" Emphasizing the importance of native-speaker praise, student 2-D said, "*When foreigners say, 'Your English is good,' I feel motivated.*" The last reason why learners are motivated stems from the role of English in the world as a lingua franca. Learners know they will be able to communicate with people around the globe thanks to the role of English as an international language.

Students also elaborated on their feelings when they speak English. The first sub-theme was anxiety. Learners feel anxious while talking due to self-driven behaviors and classroom-related factors. Some students state that self-related factors such as low proficiency, lack of proper pronunciation, and lack of practice hold them back. Others attribute their anxiety to the proficiency level of native speakers and the fact that they are strangers. Talking to native speakers of English may have a demotivating effect on learners. Emphasizing the native speakers' effect on L2 anxiety, student 2-C said, "*Some natives are not eager to talk; that demotivates me. Some of them speak very fast and use slang terms.*" Another factor resulting in anxiety is the language classroom itself. In classrooms, some learners may not find a convenient atmosphere to speak with ease. Immediate error corrections by the teacher are not welcomed by many students. Some learners refrain from speaking in the classroom since they believe their friends will ridicule their mistakes. Focusing on the negative behaviors of the students in the class, student 4-D said, "*I have always felt nervous talking in the classroom. I thought before I spoke since others may laugh at my mistakes.*" Oral exams are another factor that increases anxiety. Some learners said they feel the highest level of anxiety during an exam, which hinders their speaking performance.

Another sub-theme reveals why and how learners feel relaxed while talking in English. Relaxed speakers are generally composed of confident and sociable learners. To gain confidence in the target language, one essential requirement is competency. Competent learners are usually less anxious. Emphasizing the role of competence in dealing with anxiety, learner 1-C said, "*I think most people feel anxious about talking to native speakers since they don't know the language well, but I don't. I, in fact, feel confident. I have never been to your country but I know your language, so that makes me feel confident.*" Besides competency, personal traits such as extroversion are highly valued by learners. One learner argues that if one is of a sociable type, he or she is likely to be more relaxed while speaking than a reserved learner. Learners also feel relaxed when they are in a friendly atmosphere or when they are talking to someone they know. Even in their mother tongue, some people may be hesitant to talk to those they do not know well. Emphasizing the importance of the communication partner in the speaking context,

learner 3-B said, "*I feel relaxed talking to my acquaintances but anxious while I am talking in an exam or with a stranger.*"

Discussion

This study explored how proficient speakers of English become so and used a qualitative focus-study approach to investigate what factors play a role in these learners' success. In parallel with various studies, the findings indicated that both contextual factors related to students' self, school or out-of-school settings, and affective factors such as motivation and anxiety contribute to these learners' success, and these factors are important for the enhancement of speaking skills.

Findings regarding the contextual factors revealed that advanced learners adopt several self-practice strategies and use various contextual factors to improve their speaking skills. It has been proved that the school factor is only a piece of the puzzle and that learners use every opportunity to practice English both in and out-of-class. Consistent with the extensive use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies by advanced learners in the literature (Kawai, 2008; Pawlak, 2018) and studying coping strategies for speaking enhancement in non-native-speaking contexts (Abrar et al., 2018), the students monitored themselves with mirror techniques, imitation techniques, and self-talk. They focused on fluency and accuracy while speaking in terms of vocabulary selection and pronunciation. These types of strategies are useful not only for speaking proficiency engagement but also in creating confidence in learners (Forbes & Fishes, 2018). Although both native and non-native English-speaking teachers have specific advantages and there is no convincing evidence of one group's superiority over another, English native speakers are highly preferred by the institutions and students in EFL settings (Levis, Sonsaat, Link, & Barriuso, 2016). Supporting this belief, the learners in this study mentioned having a native speaker teacher as a privileged and supportive factor of their speaking proficiency and pronunciation, which parallels the relevant research (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2006). Additionally, positive teacher feedback is a motivator for speaking confidence and proficiency (Forbes & Fishes, 2018).

In connection with the research about studying a target language abroad on learner beliefs (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Surtees, 2016), the learners in this study expressed that experience gained with student exchange programs and language courses in a native English-speaking country are influential in belief systems and English proficiency. In addition to self-practice efforts, teacher support, and foreign country experiences, the students benefited from any opportunity they could find in their home country and attended several events. This finding was expected, as proficient learners are autonomous learners who know their strengths and weaknesses well and make decisions to improve themselves at every opportunity (Cotterall, 2008; Kawai, 2008). Proficient language learners also make significant use of technology and find positive connections with language learning outcomes (Lai, Zhu, & Gong, 2015; Reinders & White, 2011; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). Supporting these thoughts, the learners in the study used various technological tools to improve their speaking skills, such as playing video games online and offline, participating in chat apps to connect with native speakers, and watching television series or listening to radio to enhance their pronunciation and understanding. All of these findings reveal that proficient English speakers are actively engaged in the language learning process both in class and outside of class, engage in self-directed strategies to improve their proficiency, and create significant opportunities for practicing their English.

Affective factors, including motivation and anxiety, also emerged in the focus-group discussions. These two themes correspond to psychological factors that take place while studying English and starting a conversation in English. Motivation is one of the strongest predictors of L2 learning success (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). Within the framework of self-determination theory (SDT), (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017), L2 motivation ranged from the least self-determined to the most self-determined orientation. Consequently, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations are significant for boosting motivation to speak English. Connected with previous research (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017), intrinsic motivators include the joy and pleasure of language, and extrinsic motivators include pursuing career goals, praise, reward, and English being a lingua franca. Regarding the second affective factor, anxiety, it seems that although language learners are high achievers and enjoy a relatively high level of mastery in speaking English, they feel anxious when doing so. Consequently, an advanced level of language learning does not guarantee anxiety-free or stress-free conversations. Corroborating the results of a number of research studies (Abrar et al., 2018; Gan, 2013; Kitano, 2001; Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009), the main stressors even for competent English speakers are self-imposed and school-related factors such as linguistic competence, lack of opportunities to speak English, underestimation of their own capacity, comparisons with classmates, oral proficiency exams, and negative teacher behaviors. It is known that affective factors are closely connected with self-concept, which plays an important role in determining students' motivation to speak and see their actual competency levels (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

It should also be noted that although anxiety is accepted as an indicator of poor speaking performance and the cause of failure in speaking in the literature (Horwitz, 2001; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Liu, 2006), the case might be different for advanced learners of English. Since these learners are much more aware of the importance of the activity and the resulting higher expectations, they might place significant self-imposed pressure on their speaking ability. Sometimes, higher proficiency means higher anxiety as well (Kitano, 2001; Marzec-Stawiarska, 2015, Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009). Significant anxiety does not equate with limited proficiency, as there is no positive relationship between success and anxiety among advanced-level learners (Marcos-Llinas & Garau, 2009). As Marzec-Stawiarska (2015) hypothesizes, L2 anxiety might have a more facilitative nature for speaking engagement. Emphasizing the connection among self-concepts, students in this study are relaxed while speaking as they have great self-confidence and sociable characteristics. They are also more relaxed while speaking with their acquaintances than while speaking with a foreigner. This finding corroborates the findings of Dewaele (2007).

Conclusion

The study findings presented above provide further understanding about the nature of proficient speakers of English and help explain why some students outperform others while speaking. The findings also provide a basis for some teaching implications for language teachers and educators. They reveal that proficient speakers of English are autonomous learners who take responsibility for their own learning and seize every opportunity to practice both inside and outside class. While self-practice strategies and school-related factors are influential, these learners also practice their English in experiences abroad and in their home country. They use technology for practice and acknowledge that language learning should go beyond the confines of the classroom to ensure better oral communication. Additionally, they have revealed affective factors for speaking proficiency enhancement. Considering these findings, it is clear that language teachers should create opportunities for learners to practice speaking within an

autonomy-supportive L2 context and move language learning beyond the classroom with technology integration. Based on the literature (Dincer & Yesilyurt, 2017; Lai et al., 2015; Reeve, 2012), teachers should first acknowledge students' interests and care about students' needs and interests during the teaching process. They should let students be physically, emotionally, and cognitively engaged in their learning and support language learners' autonomous motivation to study English with authentic language learning experiences. It should also be noted that this study, with its pure qualitative design, is not flawless, and one should approach its findings with caution. First, the study was conducted with a small sample of advanced learners of English. Second, one type of data collection methodology was adopted in the study. Then, further research could be conducted with larger sample size and diversified data collection strategy to yield stronger results. Although focus-group interviews provide rich data and strengthen the results, adopting student observation techniques, allowing students to keep language-learning diaries, and encouraging them to write a reflective journal on their daily exercises for further research might add much to the understanding of proficient speakers. Additionally, as L2 anxiety painted a different picture for proficient speakers in this study, further research might focus on this issue and examine more closely the links between anxiety and language proficiency level. In sum, understanding the nature of proficient English speakers is a less charted-terrain of language learning research, and examining why proficient learners outperform others remains a promising area of study waiting for answers.

Acknowledgments

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