

Pre-Service EFL Teachers' Low-Level of Oral Proficiency and Suggestions for Enhancing It

Gülten KOŞAR¹

¹ Dr., Hatay Mustafa Kemal University, Turkey
gencoglugulten@gmail.com

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Abstract: English language teachers play a major role in enhancing the development of students' speaking skills. However, only if teachers are proficient in speaking English, may they support their students in improving their oral proficiency. This qualitative case study aims at unearthing pre-service English as a foreign language teachers' (henceforth PSEFLT's) perceptions with respect to the reasons for their low level of oral proficiency, exploring the current initiatives PSEFLT's take to improve it, and finding out their suggestions concerning the improvements for the initial English as a foreign language (hereafter EFL) teacher education program they are enrolled in to assist them in the endeavors they have been making. The results obtained by administering a survey and a semi-structured interview with freshman PSEFLT's indicated that they did not deem their level of oral proficiency adequate, and lack of emphasis on teaching speaking and the pressure placed on them by high-stakes testing in their prior English language learning experiences adversely affected their oral proficiency. The findings also revealed the necessity for offering all courses in initial EFL teacher education programs in English. Teacher educators, policy makers and researchers investigating the reasons lying behind PSEFLT's' and/or EFL learners' low level of oral proficiency and probing distinct ways of increasing it could benefit from the findings of this study.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Eğitim dili olarak İngilizce, konuşma yeterliği, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğretecek aday İngilizce öğretmenleri, geçmiş İngilizce öğrenme tecrübeleri

Aday İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin Düşük Seviye Konuşma Yeterliği ve Geliştirilmesi için Öneriler

Öz: Öğrencilerin konuşma becerilerinin gelişiminde İngilizce öğretmenleri önemli rol oynamaktadır. Ancak, öğretmen, İngilizce konuşma becerisinde yetkin ise öğrencilerinin konuşma becerilerinin gelişiminde yardımcı olabilir. Bu nitel durum çalışması, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğretecek aday İngilizce öğretmenlerinin konuşma becerisindeki düşük seviyelerinin altında yatan nedenlerle ilişkili algılarını ortaya çıkarmayı, konuşma becerilerini geliştirmek adına atıyor oldukları adımları araştırmayı ve İngilizce Öğretmenliği Bölümünce, aday İngilizce öğretmenlerinin konuşma becerilerini arttırmaya yönelik neler yapılabileceğine dair önerilerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Birinci sınıf aday İngilizce öğretmenlerine uygulanan anket ve yarı-yapılandırılmış mülakattan edinilen verilerin analizinden elde edilen bulgular, katılımcıların konuşma becerisindeki mevcut seviyelerini yeterli bulmadıklarını, geçmiş İngilizce öğrenim tecrübelerinde konuşma becerisinin öğretime yer verilmemesinden ve sınav odaklı uygulamalardan dolayı konuşma becerilerinin olumsuz etkilediğini göstermektedir. Bulgular, ayrıca, İngilizce Öğretmenliği Bölümünde tüm derslerin İngilizce verilmesi gerektiğini işaret etmektedir. Bu çalışmada sunulan bulgulardan, öğretmen eğitimcileri, politika belirleyicileri ve İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğretecek aday İngilizce öğretmenlerinin ve/veya İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilerin konuşma becerilerini geliştirmek için farklı yöntemler araştırmakta olan araştırmacılar faydalanabilir.

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1. Introduction

In comparison to developing competence in other language skills, relatively more time and energy is required in improving speaking skills, which could derive from a range of factors. Literature encapsulates a number of studies examining the factors influencing the difficulty in enhancing oral proficiency (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Baker & Westrup, 2003; Bozorgian, 2012; Doff, 1998; Hammad & Ghali, 2015; Hughes, 2002; Latha, 2012; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Littlewood, 2007; Nation & Newton, 2009; Savaşçı, 2014; Tanveer, 2007; Urrutia & Vega, 2010; Woodrow, 2006), the findings of which included reasons such as performance conditions, affective variables, listening ability, knowledge of the topic, feedback provided during speaking activities, phonological, syntactic and vocabulary knowledge, psychological factors such as motivation and personality, excessive use of students' L1 in lessons, and lack of training in speaking strategies. The ways in which English lessons are offered occupy a prominent place in developing speaking skills in EFL learning settings like the one in which this research is carried out; for this reason, an explanation of the recent changes in English language teaching (ELT) in Turkey is presented prior to a review of the literature on PSEFLT's' perceptions regarding their low level of oral proficiency and the reasons underlying it.

The curriculum change taking place in 1997 marked a paramount change in ELT policy in that the communicative approach was advanced into the ELT curriculum (Kırkgöz, 2005; Sarıçoban & Sarıçoban, 2012). The introduction of the communicative approach into the curriculum induced the emergence of more significance attached to using language for interaction and communication because communicative language teaching views language as a system for conveying meaning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Current changes in the Turkish education system have brought along the transition from 8+4 education model to the new 4+4+4 education model, in which English is offered from grade 2. The revisions in the ELT curriculum are congruent with the descriptors and principles of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which accentuates the necessity of putting learning into real-life practice to stimulate fluency, proficiency and language retention (CoE, 2001).

Students gaining the right to study at an ELT department in Turkey either have to take a proficiency exam prepared and administered by the university and pass it or hold a valid score from a number of exams involving the one administered by the Assessment, Selection and Placement Center, IELTS and TOEFL to be able to commence taking courses in the department. Students failing the proficiency exam or not having a valid score from foreign language examinations must attend a preparatory program to enhance their overall language proficiency.

1.1. Literature Review

Related literature review uncovers that few studies have been carried out up till today to shed light on PSEFLT's' perceptions concerning their level of oral proficiency. Dinçer and Yeşilyurt (2013) carried out research which sought to find out PSEFLT's' evaluations of their speaking skills. The findings showed that respondents did not view themselves as competent in speaking. Gan (2012) conducted a study with 20 PSEFLT's enrolled in the fourth year of the program to explore the difficulties they encountered in developing their oral proficiency. The findings obtained from the analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews showed that inadequate vocabulary, desire to speak with grammatical accuracy, problems

with pronunciation and intonation, insufficiency of the opportunities for speaking English in class, lack of focus in the curriculum on language improvement, and an input-poor environment outside class were put forward as factors negatively affecting the improvement in their oral proficiency. The research undertaken by Hammad and Ghali (2015) investigated the reasons behind pre-service teachers' high level of speaking anxiety. The results indicated that PSEFLT's high level of speaking anxiety was a consequence of inappropriate procedures established by instructors such as L1 and English usage as the mediums of instruction in classes, fear of negative evaluation and sensitivity towards instructors' comments.

How English has been taught before students begin their tertiary education impacts their level of oral proficiency at the tertiary level; therefore, past English language learning experiences need to be investigated. Oktay (2014) conducted research, including 117 senior pre-service teachers and 41 instructors, to explore the reasons why foreign language teaching is not successful in Turkey. The results of the study demonstrated the great emphasis laid upon teaching grammar as the source of failure in foreign language learning. In a similar vein, British Council (2013) carried out a research in association with TEPAV to inform the Ministry of National Education on low level speaking abilities through observing 80 classes of English at grades 4-12 in 48 schools. The findings indicated that teaching conducted in the classes did not enable students to use English to communicate and function independently. Grammar-based tests and teacher-centered teaching dominated the observed English lessons. Another striking finding presented in the report was that English was taught as a subject not as a medium of communication by teachers most of whom had adequate language proficiency and professional capability to teach English; additionally, the grammar-based approach was commonly implemented in the lessons. These factors were exhibited as the obstacles exercising considerable influence on Turkish EFL learners' inaptness in communicating in English. In Erarslan's (2018) study, findings showed the prevalence of paper-pencil exams and the paucity of speaking skill assessments were among the weaknesses of the ELT program at primary school level. Though it is not one of the studies carried out in a tertiary context, it is one to be kept in sight to critically evaluate the reasons behind PSEFLT's low level of oral proficiency.

Literature also entails studies examining PSEFLT's perceptions of teaching speaking skill. Tüfekçi (2017) conducted one of those studies, the results of which reported that the participants of the study, 48 PSEFLT's, explained the inability of Turkish learners of English in speaking as a consequence of the way English was taught and exams comprised of multiple-choice questions. English language teachers were presented as another factor exerting a negative impact upon students' speaking skills in that they were viewed as unmotivated, uninterested and inactive by the majority of the participants. Chen and Goh (2011) investigated the problems faced in teaching speaking at tertiary level. The results showed that respondents' low level of self-efficacy for teaching speaking unfavorably impinged upon their ability to teach speaking.

Though the literature is rich in the explorations into the factors behind EFL learners' low level of oral proficiency, and a variety of techniques have been implemented to improve it, the results to be presented in this study are likely to broaden the extant knowledge of the reasons set out by PSEFLT's for their low level of oral proficiency. Additionally, this research could contribute to the existing literature by exhibiting the PSEFLT's suggestions concerning what initial EFL teacher training programs can do to effectively help them to enhance their oral proficiency. Below are the research questions to which this paper seeks answers:

1. How do PSEFLT's rate their current level of oral proficiency?
2. What factors have played a role in PSEFLT's' current level of oral proficiency?
3. What initiatives have PSEFLT's been undertaking to enhance their oral proficiency?
4. What could be done by initial EFL teacher education programs to aid PSEFLT's in their endeavors to develop their oral proficiency?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This qualitative case study was conducted in the spring term of the 2018-2019 academic year. Pandey and Patnaik (2014) describe the function of qualitative researchers in the following words: "The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (p. 5745). Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Merriam (1995) recommend "prolonged engagement" between the researcher and the respondents in order to establish a relationship of trust between them, which according to Pandey and Patnaik (2014), requires "spending adequate time observing various aspects of a setting, speaking with a range of people, and developing relationships and rapport with members of the organization and community" (p. 5747). With this in mind, a qualitative method is appropriate for this research, because at the time of the study, the researcher had been teaching the participants for six months; therefore, the existing relationship fostered trustworthiness in the answers.

2.2. Participants and The Procedure

Study participants included 52 freshman PSEFLT's, 17 male and 35 female students, studying at a state university in Turkey. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. The mean age of the participants was 18.94. The participants had taken ten courses in the fall term, five of which are offered in Turkish since the medium of instruction in the university where this study was conducted is Turkish. The courses offered in Turkish are professional teaching knowledge, Turkish, history and information technologies courses. When this study was undertaken, four courses including Turkish, history and two courses on professional teaching knowledge were offered in Turkish in the spring term of the first year of the program.

The researcher had been teaching the participants for six months, and thereby having the chance to observe how proficient they were in speaking English. Starting from the very first lesson, she had realized the difficulties the participants experienced in speaking English since they either had an inclination to refrain from responding to the questions raised by the researcher or to respond in Turkish saying "I understand you, but I cannot answer in English because my English is not enough." The researcher was able to build a relationship of trust with the participants over six months, and it was clear that the difficulty in communicating in English was sustained because participants continued to switch to L1 after completing the fall term; therefore, it did not merely stem from freshman PSEFLT anxiety at the beginning of the fall term.

At the beginning of the spring term, the researcher distributed the survey to all the participants in one of the lessons taught and asked them to answer the questions in 20 minutes. In pursuit of conducting the survey and reading the responses given to the questions, she carried out a semi-structured interview with 21 respondents.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

2.3.1. Survey

A survey was administered with a view to finding answers to the questions of how participating PSEFLT's rated their oral proficiency, what factors impacted it, what they had been doing to ameliorate their oral proficiency, and what could be done by the initial EFL teacher education program to support them in enhancing their oral proficiency. One multiple-choice question asked the participants to rate their level of oral proficiency, while the remaining ones were open-ended. The questions in the survey served as a means to investigate answers to the research questions. In an effort to ensure the validity of the questions, they were read by two experts, one of whom has been undertaking studies on improving adult learners' speaking skills, and the other one is an English language teacher educator training PSEFLT's for the past 15 years. Additionally, the survey was conducted with three PSEFLT's studying at a different state university so as to ensure the comprehensibility of the questions. Revisions were made according to the recommendations of these three PSEFLT's and the experts.

2.3.2. Semi-structured interview

Subsequent to administering the survey and reading all the participants' responses to the questions, a semi-structured interview comprising three questions was carried out with 21 participants willing to be interviewed in an attempt to deepen the understanding of what was stated in the survey by the participants. The interviews included questions on how their past English language learning experiences wielded an influence upon their current low level of oral proficiency, what they had been doing, what steps they were planning to take to develop their language skills, and why they firmly believed that the medium of instruction should be English in all the courses in the program. The questions were read by the experts mentioned in the previous subheading and asked to the PSEFLT's, also referred to in the preceding paragraph, to ensure their validity, and the changes in the wordings of the questions were made in accord with their suggestions to make them more precise.

The participants wanted the interview to be conducted in Turkish rather than English as they might not be able to express their ideas in detail in English due to their low level of oral proficiency. Each interview lasted 10-15 minutes. An interview protocol including information about the date of the interview, the name of the interviewee and his/her responses to the questions was kept for each interviewee.

2.3.3. Data Analysis

Inductive content analysis was conducted to analyze the data gathered from the open-ended questions in the survey. Prior to starting the coding process, two coders, one of whom was the researcher, read the survey data reiteratively. Then, the data were coded and categories were developed from the codes. Thereafter, the two coders arrived at a consensus over the discrepancies in their categories via rereading the data and codes over and over again. Subsequently, in view of the categories, themes were formed.

Peer debriefing and member checks were employed to ascertain the credibility of the findings. Peer debriefing was used subsequent to the content analysis, because, as maintained by Lincoln and Guba (1985), peer debriefing "is a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). Aside from peer debriefing, in the light of what is proposed by Merriam (1995),

member checks were also done following the analysis by asking the participants to have a look at the interpretations of the data to ensure they reflected what they meant.

3. Findings

3.1. Participants' Level of Oral Proficiency

The first question in the survey was posed to find out how the participants rated their level of oral proficiency in English. Table 1 below illustrates the values obtained from the analysis.

Table 1

Respondents' current level of oral proficiency

Level	N
Poor	23
Fair	19
Good	9
Very Good	1
Excellent	0

Table 1 shows that none of the participants viewed their oral proficiency level as “excellent.” Only one of the participants rated her oral proficiency level as “very good.” Nine participants rated their oral proficiency as “good”. Nineteen PSEFLT's chose “fair” to rate their level of oral proficiency, and 23 PSEFLT's stated their level of oral proficiency was “poor.”

3.2. Reasons Behind Low Level of Oral Proficiency

The second survey question sought to identify the factors that negatively impacted participants' low level of oral proficiency. The themes that were developed from the analysis are EFL learning, prior English language learning experiences, and high level of speaking anxiety.

3.2.1. EFL learning

EFL learning serves to explicate participants' low level of oral proficiency. The participants stated in the survey and in the interview that learning English in a country where it is not the native language resulted in few opportunities for practicing speaking. The statements extracted from one of the participants' responses in the survey and the ones from another participant's interview protocol typify the perceptions of the study participants regarding the effect of EFL learning on their low level of oral proficiency.

If someone wants to speak English, s/he needs to practice speaking with somebody, yet there are not enough people to practice speaking in our country. Because of this, I am not good at speaking. (Survey-PSEFLT 7)

I couldn't develop my speaking skill due to the lack of opportunities for using English as a means of communication. In the English lessons, I could produce one or two sentences in English but in my daily life, I had no chance to practice speaking. (Interview-PSEFLT 15)

3.2.2. Prior English language learning experiences

Participants' responses to the question of what factors have been influential in their level of oral proficiency led to the development of the theme "prior English language learning experiences." The participants stated both in the survey and in the semi-structured interviews that previous educational experiences played a fundamental role in their speaking skills. The participants highlighted that the major concern of their past teachers was getting them ready for high-stakes exams in which having good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary was at the forefront. Additionally, participants reported that previous English teachers were a factor which contributed to the development of this theme. Some of the participants stated in the survey that their previous English teachers did not speak English in lessons; contrarily, they used Turkish as the medium of instruction whilst teaching English. The extracts below exemplify participants' conceptions regarding the impact of prior English language learning experiences on their level of oral proficiency.

When I was at high school, I wanted to improve my grammar and vocabulary knowledge because only grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and reading skills were assessed on the university entrance exam. (Interview-PSEFLT 11)

When I was at primary and secondary school, my teachers taught me grammar and vocabulary, I mean I memorized grammar rules and words. At high school, my teachers told me that I had to prepare for the university entrance exam and learn grammar and vocabulary. I can say that I did not practice speaking at all. (Survey-PSEFLT 2)

3.2.3. High level of speaking anxiety

High level of speaking anxiety was considered by the participants as a factor that adversely affected their oral proficiency. The responses that contributed to the emergence of this theme involved being scared of making mistakes and consequently feeling self-conscious, and being unable to cope with speaking anxiety. In the interview, a question aiming at revealing the impact of high level of speaking anxiety on participants' level of oral proficiency was asked of the interviewees.

When I was at high school, my classmates ridiculed the students mispronouncing words. I was eager to improve my speaking skill at high school and now I am still eager to do so; however, I could not develop my speaking skill because I did not speak in lessons because of the fear of being ridiculed by my peers. (Interview-PSEFLT 20)

3.3. Initiatives Undertaken By The Participants To Improve Their Level of Oral Proficiency

The third question was added to the survey to learn about what the participants had been doing to improve their oral proficiency. The use of technological devices and joining speaking clubs were the themes that developed in the content analysis.

3.3.1. Use of technology

Participants' responses revealed that the majority of them watched TV series and movies to develop their speaking skills. Sixteen of the participants deeming their level of oral proficiency poor, fair or good also used special apps enabling them to practice speaking,

which was believed to be beneficial for anyone having the desire to improve their speaking skills.

Once I started to take courses in the department, I realized that I needed to do something immediately to improve my speaking skill. I had not watched movies and TV series in English before but now I watch a movie every day. It has really helped me develop my speaking skill. (Interview-PSEFLT 3)

3.3.2. Joining speaking clubs

Participating in speaking clubs was another initiative some of the participants took to improve their level of oral proficiency. The participants' responses which contributed to the development of this theme by their responses indicated that clubs created an environment for them to practice speaking, increase their self-confidence, and get a chance to talk about appealing topics.

I have joined a speaking club conducted by European Students Forum. I really find it useful. We discuss about popular issues, about language learning and teaching. I hope I will be speaking better till the end of the year. (Survey-PSEFLT 41)

3.4. Participants' Recommendations Concerning What Could Be Done By Initial EFL Teacher Education Programs To Help Develop Their Speaking Skills

The last question in the survey asked participants for their suggestions as to what could be done by the initial EFL teacher education program to support them in improving their speaking skills. The content analysis of the participants' answers in the survey to this research question led to the development three themes: English as the medium of instruction, the prohibition of the use of first language (L1) in lessons, and delivering more presentations in English.

3.4.1. English as the medium of instruction

Almost all the survey respondents stated that English should be the medium of instruction in all the courses offered in the department of English language teaching. The participants underscored in their responses that nearly half of the courses were offered in Turkish, which minimized the chance for practicing speaking, and thus, developing their oral proficiency. The first extract is from the interview protocol of one of the participants, and the second is from another participant's survey, and they illustrate the common perception of the participants about using English as the medium of instruction.

Because the medium of instruction in our university is not English, professional teaching knowledge courses are taught in Turkish. This means that we take five courses in Turkish and we have 10 courses in total. This really influences our speaking skill negatively. We want to be exposed to English more in lessons. (Interview-PSEFLT 9)

Professional teaching knowledge courses are offered in Turkish in our department, which I find weird, because we will be English teachers and need as many opportunities as possible for speaking in English. When I asked why those courses were in Turkish, I was told that the medium of instruction in our university was not English. I do not know if or not they can change the medium of instruction in other departments, but at least in our department, it should be English as soon as possible. (Survey-PSEFLT 43)

3.4.2. Prohibition of the use of L1 in lessons

The participants expressed in the surveys and the interviews that some teacher educators teaching content knowledge courses spoke in their L1 in lessons as well as English, and the PSEFLT's, therefore, displayed a tendency to speak Turkish in lessons. For this reason, the participants emphasized the necessity for the ban on L1 use in content knowledge courses to be imposed by teacher educators to accomplish the goal of supporting PSEFLT's in enhancing their oral proficiency.

Use of L1 should be prohibited in lessons. Half of our courses are already taught in our L1. In subject matter knowledge courses, lecturers should ban the use of L1 because when they ask a question in English, students generally answer in L1 and then lecturers start to speak in L1 too instead of making students answer in English. Unless lecturers do not acknowledge English as the medium of instruction, students will keep using L1. (Interview-PSEFLT 21)

Subject matter knowledge courses create the environment for the PSEFLT's to discuss about anything related to language learning by using English. In these courses, we use English as the medium of communication but if lecturers speak L1 and do not warn the students not to speak L1, it becomes the medium of instruction in subject matter knowledge courses as well. (Interview-PSEFLT 6)

3.4.3. Delivering more presentations in English

The content analysis also revealed that the participants wanted to make more presentations in subject matter knowledge courses in English as they believed that delivering presentations in front of the whole class improved their level of oral proficiency. The participants expressed a strong desire for more opportunities to deliver presentations in the interviews. The following excerpts exemplify these perceptions.

In oral communications course, I gave a presentation and this helped me build my self-confidence in terms of speaking in front of people. Therefore, I want to be given more chances to make presentations. (Interview-PSEFLT-15)

Even though making presentations in courses may not develop my impromptu speaking skills, it still helps develop my oral proficiency. Therefore, no matter what the content of the course is, lecturers can ask us to prepare and deliver presentations. (Interview-PSEFLT4)

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that the participants deemed their current level of oral proficiency low. This parallels the observation of the researcher in that she had decided to conduct this study subsequent to observing the difficulties faced by the participants in speaking English. Likewise, the findings obtained in the study carried out by Dinçer and Yeşilyurt (2013) reported that participating PSEFLT's did not perceive themselves as competent in speaking. The issue worth contemplating at this point is how PSEFLT's with poor speaking skills can help and encourage their prospective students to develop their speaking skills.

One of the purposes of this study was to investigate the factors having impacted PSEFLT's low level of oral proficiency. The results showed that EFL learning, previous English language learning experiences grammar- and testing-based teaching, lack of focus on teaching speaking skill, and high level of speaking anxiety played an important role in their level of oral proficiency. The results are in agreement with the ones reported in the research carried out by Gan (2012) with senior PSEFLT's, which highlighted an input-poor environment stemming from EFL learning as one of the factors adversely influencing enhancement in oral proficiency. In line with the findings of this study, the study done by Hammad and Ghali (2015) reported that high level of speaking anxiety that could be provoked by PSEFLT's fear of being exposed to negative evaluation and sensitivity towards teachers' correcting impinged on their oral proficiency. Irrespective of the age of the learner, high level of speaking anxiety appears to exert a profound impact on learners' participation in lessons in English. This problem maintains its continuity among the participating PSEFLT's who are supposed to encourage their prospective students to speak English. Therefore, the question that could arise in one's mind is to what extent PSEFLT's refraining from speaking English can improve their oral proficiency enough to teach English using English, and how can said teachers aid their students in developing their speaking skills.

In this study, the findings showed participants' current low level of oral proficiency could be partially attributed to their past English language learning experiences. Similarly, the results reported in the study conducted by Oktay (2014) indicated that the failure in foreign language teaching in Turkey was rooted in the heavy emphasis on grammar teaching. In parallel to the findings presented in this paper and Oktay's (ibid) study, the research conducted by British Council in association with TEPAV (2013) to scrutinize the reasons behind the failure in speaking English in Turkey reported that grammar-based testing, implementation of grammar-based approach in lessons, and teaching English as a subject not as a means of communication were the significant factors leading to the ineptness of Turkish learners of English at speaking English.

The results in the study done by Tüfekçi (2017) to explore PSEFLT's perceptions regarding teaching speaking skills are consistent with the ones in this study. The results presented in that study showed that tests comprised of multiple-choice questions played a pivotal role in Turkish learners' inability to speak English, and in this study, the participants also pinpointed testing-based teaching as one of the reasons underlying the difficulties they had been experiencing in speaking skill. The findings in relation to the effect of testing-based teaching on participants' level of oral proficiency indicated the need for the assessment of the progression in students' speaking skills, taking priority over grammar and vocabulary teaching. In doing so, students might attempt to improve their speaking skills, and the students having already embarked on initiatives to enhance their level of oral proficiency could strive more to demonstrate a marked improvement in their speaking skills. Erarslan (2018) also stated the absence of speaking assessment as one of the weaknesses of the English language teaching program at the primary school level in Turkey.

The findings of this study shed light on the necessity of reconsidering the place of language teaching in initial EFL teacher education programs. Though the primary purpose of the program is equipping PSEFLT's with the knowledge of how to teach English and be a good teacher rather than teaching them English, slight amendments to the program, which are likely to contribute to enhancing improvement in PSEFLT's oral proficiency, such as increasing total credit of oral communications course, can be made. In saying that, it is important to stress that no matter how many fundamental changes are made in the program,

it is the teacher educator who can make a real change in the course/s they teach by ensuring active participation of PSEFLT's, offering the course/s in English and creating a student-centered environment. As well as the actions to be taken by teacher educators and increasing the credits of the courses targeting PSEFLT's oral proficiency, the proficiency exams administered before PSEFLT's begin to take courses in the department need to be designed in such a way that PSEFLT's who perform poorly in the oral exam, irrespective of their performance on other skills, are to be enrolled in the preparatory program to improve their level of oral proficiency.

The results in this study also demonstrated a range of suggestions offered by PSEFLT's concerning what could be done by initial EFL teacher education programs besides their personal endeavors like using apps notably designed to develop speaking skill. The suggestions they came up with included the prohibition of the use of students' L1 in classes, and the use of English as the medium of instruction by teacher educators teaching professional teaching knowledge courses, which makes sense considering the number of courses in which Turkish is the medium of instruction. In the first term of the EFL teacher education program, half of the courses are offered in Turkish in the university where this research was carried out, which could be changed by assigning teacher educators who can teach pedagogical teaching knowledge courses in English or employing teacher educators having a good command of English to teach PSEFLT's in English.

5. Conclusion

The present study sought to uncover the reasons for PSEFLT's low level of oral proficiency, and their suggestions to improve it. However, this study is not free of limitations. Because this research is a qualitative case study, and only 52 first-year PSEFLT's from the same university participated in this study, the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts. Further research in which more participants from different universities take part needs to be done to obtain more detailed insights into the issue. Aside from this, studies exploring whether or not PSEFLT's views on the reasons for low level of oral proficiency change according to their year of study can be undertaken.

Taking into consideration the prevailing problem in Turkey about the difficulty in speaking English, the actions to be taken by initial EFL teacher education programs are highly significant. Unless PSEFLT's can speak English, they may be the teachers teaching English as a subject and not assisting students in using English as a means of communication. For this reason, initiatives to support PSEFLT's in developing their oral proficiency need to be undertaken so that they can aid their prospective students in developing their speaking skills. Given the findings in this study, the medium of instruction in all the courses offered at departments of English language teaching needs to be English, and the courses aiming to help student teachers develop their speaking skills should be offered every term till their graduation. Furthermore, an English oral exam in which candidates are to get a minimum of 85 could be administered by the Assessment Selection and Placement Center before allocating graduates as English language teachers. Such an initiative might force departments of English language teaching to take more decisive and drastic steps to assist PSEFLT's in improving their speaking skills.

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