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Perspectives and Experiences of EFL Preparatory Class Students on Online Formative Task-Based Assessment of Speaking Skills

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Abstract

The unforeseen Covid-19 outbreak prompted a dramatic shift to online teaching and assessment, pushing teachers to employ a variety of unconventional teaching strategies and assessment techniques. The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of Turkish EFL learners regarding the online formative task-based speech assessment (OFTBSA) practice in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Qualitative case study design was used to achieve the purpose of the research. The main data collection tool was an open-ended questionnaire consisting of three questions created in line with the research questions of the study. In addition, an online focus group interview was conducted with 15 students. The results revealed that students were generally satisfied with the online implementation of the speaking exams, but poor internet connection was one of the biggest obstacles affecting their performance. Considering the findings, some conclusions were made about the ways to implement OFTBSA more effectively.

Keywords: Task-based assessment, language assessment, formative assessment, speaking assessment, online speaking assessment

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1. Introduction

Teachers and educators were forced to abandon the traditional teaching approaches due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At all levels of education, learning, teaching, and assessment processes have had to be adapted to rapidly changing circumstances. Moreover, assessment and testing practices had to be transferred to virtual platforms due to the profound effects of COVID-19 pandemic. In these unprecedented times, not only teaching and learning materials but also different assessment techniques used by teachers and educators come into prominence. In this respect, more communicatively-oriented virtual assessment paradigms such as virtual task based assessment come to the fore rather than the traditional standardized forms of testing (Karataş & Tuncer, 2020).

As one of the crucial components of four core language skills, teaching and assessing of speaking skills are at the heart of communicative language teaching. Speaking plays an important role in communication; therefore, the teaching and the assessment process of it should be handled meticulously. L2 speaking proficiency exams aim to see how well L2 speakers can express themselves in a pre-defined task in a pre-defined setting. There are four basic criteria to consider while assessing the speaking skills of learners: the speaker, the task, the speech and the listener. Therefore, to establish a fair, thorough assessment, these four major factors that affect learners' performance should be considered together (Duijm et al., 2018).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (hereafter CEFR), which was originally designed as a comprehensive reference tool to promote educational transparency between countries within the European Union, describes what language learners can do at different stages of their learning (Council of Europe, 2003). Just upon its publication, CEFR has become a frequently referred guideline and framework in language learning, teaching and assessment all around the world (Fulcher, 2012; Mirici & Şengül, 2020). Formative assessment which is applied to identify learner needs and adjust teaching accordingly occupies an important place within the framework of CEFR. It is defined as “a process in which teachers and students provide feedback during instruction to organize the learning and teaching process in order to increase student achievement” (McManus, 2008 p. 3). In recent years, formative assessment which is aligned with the principles of CEFR has gained increasing attention in the fields of second and foreign language (SL/FL) education. With its relevance to CEFR, it bears three key components such as real-world communicative language tasks, self and peer assessment and feedback from the teacher or peers. There are also three key principles for effective implementation of formative assessment. Integration of assessment into the teaching and learning process, use of assessment evidence to improve learning, and use of assessment to support student self-regulation are among the principles of effective formative assessment practices. By putting these principles into practice, the process of teaching and learning of teachers and students is initiated and guided by three main determinant questions: Where are we going? Where are we now? Where to next? Employing formative assessment at optimum ways allows both teachers and students learn from continual, conscientious, quality feedback (Mcmillan et al., 2017). An example of CEFR-informed formative assessment is the portfolio approach. Nowadays, portfolios are rapidly being utilized as a tool for successful implementation of formative assessment. Portfolio assessment is implemented for periodical and continuous assessment of learner outcomes (Cummins & Davesne, 2009). In this approach, students are required to fulfill tasks that demonstrate their mastery of language at a certain level, and those tasks which reflect on students' progress regularly are related to the structured set of illustrative ‘can-do’ descriptors of CEFR (Marconi et al., 2020; Nagai et al., 2020). It helps both learners and those interested in their scores in their interpretation of what someone can do in speaking at each CEFR level (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 226-243).

Online speaking assessment has been receiving much more attention during the Covid-19 pandemic. Measurement of knowledge in an online context necessitates the use of appropriate synchronous and asynchronous assessment technologies, as well as making learning accessible in such a way that learning can be observed (Oosterhof, et al., 2008). There are six dimensions that are attributable to the successful implementation of speaking exams: Whether the knowledge and understanding is being assessed or the application of problem-solving skills; interaction between the examiners and the students; authenticity in terms of multi-dimensional realistic tasks representing real life; structure which is concerned to what extent the exam is related to a well-organized, pre-determined set of questions and events that allow students prepare themselves for the exam; examiners who are required to be familiar with the content and underlying constructs being examined and the criteria being used; degree of orality; that is purely oral exam or the exam which is combined with another forms of assessment such as written paper or explanations of designs or diagrams. In brief, these aspects are also relevant in identifying concerns related to the validity and reliability of online speaking exams. An assessment is valid providing that students can demonstrate their knowledge, abilities, and values in respect to a course they are taking (Akimov, Malin, 2020; Gikandi et al., 2011; King& Boyatt, 2014). The technology that is now available makes it easier to conduct an oral examination in an online environment. However, teachers will not be able to implement online speaking exams effectively unless they get pedagogical, institutional, and technical assistance. In addition, to administer such exams, the examiner must be sufficiently skilled and competent in asking follow-up and more probing questions. To sum up, online speaking exams particularly require careful planning, organization to ensure validity, reliability and fairness. Thus, it is vital to employ a viable assessment strategy which might help learners to demonstrate their speaking proficiency (ibid).

The growing number of research papers focusing on speaking assessment that have been published in the field's main journals demonstrates that assessment of speaking skills has received a great deal of attention and effort from researchers in the field of language assessment (Fan & Yan, 2020). However, since this urgent shift to online assessment is new to most students and teachers too, research conducted in this area worldwide is still in its infancy. Likewise, although there has been a very considerable development of information technology and proliferation of digital apps in recent years, published reviews and research in literature on online assessment of speaking skills in Turkish context and worldwide, to the knowledge of the researcher, are also scant and limited. The benefits and drawbacks of the implementation of OFTBSA of EFL learners have not been deeply investigated. Therefore, having an investigation on the application of online speaking assessment can give an insight on its effectiveness in assessing students' speaking performance. Accordingly, the effectiveness of OFTBSA in Turkish EFL classrooms should be investigated to provide practical implications to the preparatory schools in Turkish universities. This is why the researcher triggered motivation to conduct a study to scrutinize the perspectives and experiences of the Turkish EFL learners regarding the implementation of OFTBA of their speaking skills amidst COVID-19 pandemic. The present research will contribute to the existing literature and enable the instructors and policymakers to better implement OFTBSA not only in preparatory classes but also in other settings where speaking skills are assessed online. This study includes the implementation of OFTBSA in a preparatory school of a state university which will serve as a benchmark of success in Emergency Distant Education (EDE).

2. Literature Review

The present study has addressed online formative task-based assessment of speaking skills of EFL learners at tertiary level. However, the literature offers limited insight into how online speaking exams are implemented as it is quite a new term for speaking assessment. To our knowledge, very few studies have examined the use of oral examination in an online environment. Okada et al., (2015) conducted a study to examine the impact of using videoconferencing for oral examinations. The oral examinations were conducted in the form of vivas for 3,205 postgraduate law students over a period of four years. The students were assessed by 53 examiners through a final paper that they had to defend orally via an online viva. The primary goal of the oral assessment was to ‘confirm that the paper was the work of the submitting students... and probe their knowledge of the submitted work to quality assure the submission’ (p. 231). The results show that some students felt the online exam did not allow them to demonstrate their level of knowledge, whereas, others appreciated it since it allowed for more flexibility in attendance and resulted in improved confidence and they found it more reliable, authentic, interactive, practical and less stressful than a face-to-face exam. In the same vein, Sotiriadou et al. (2020) used a virtual classroom to perform an oral examination. The participants were 22 students enrolled in an international management course. As an authentic assessment strategy, an interactive oral assessment was applied in which students conducted an interview with a client for whom they had previously completed an assessment report. The findings revealed that students regarded oral examinations as a way to improve and strengthen their communication skills while also almost eliminating the possibility of academic dishonesty due to the participatory aspect of the assessment.

Task-based Language Assessment (TBLA)

Since the early 1990s, task-based language assessment (TBLA) has piqued interest, owing to the continued development of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the pursuit of acceptable testing models for this pedagogical approach. Aside from their obvious importance within TBLT classrooms and programs, tasks also offer significant advantages for assessment of language learning progress (Norris, 2016). Task-Based Language Assessment (TBLA) places more emphasis on formative assessment than summative assessment since the former can lead to improved learning outcomes (Gan & Leung, 2020; Nagai, et al., 2020; Uzun & Ertok, 2020). TBLA is seen as a way of achieving a close correlation between the test performance, i.e. what the testee does during the test, and the criterion of performance, i.e. what the testee has to do in the real world (Ellis, 2003, p. 279). As an important focal point in TBLA, it is observed that language is used in more realistic and complex settings than in traditional assessment strategies and it typically requires the integration of topical, social and/or pragmatic knowledge along with knowledge of the formal elements of language (Mislevy, et al., 2002). Long & Norris (2000) distinguished TBLA from other forms of language performance assessment as follows:

“Task-based language assessment takes the task itself as the fundamental unit of analysis motivating item selection, test instrument construction, and the rating of task performance. Task-based assessment does not simply utilize the real-world task as a means for eliciting particular components of the language system, which are then measured or evaluated; instead, the construct of interest is performance of the task itself” (p.60).

For many years, there has always been an interest in using such a task-based assessment approach in SL/FL education contexts so that teachers can see whether examinees can accomplish particular meaningful communicative target tasks or task types with the language knowledge and abilities they have learnt (Norris, et al., 2002). TBLA that is conducted throughout EDE is the assessment process where students engage in various cognitive processes and mental processes to develop interaction to solve

communicative tasks via videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams etc. Through task-based assessment of their speaking proficiency, EFL learners gain knowledge, confidence and competence in improving their oral communication skills (Al Kandari & Al Qattan, 2020; Rachayon & Soontornwipast, 2019; Rahman, 2010; Ramasamy et al. 2018; Shashikala, 2018; Subekti, 2020). To reiterate, learners of EFL are likely to master the language at a high level (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Formative Task-based Assessment

University instructors have recently focused more on using authentic learning activities and authentic tasks for formative assessment of speaking skills as they reflect what and how students learn. Authentic tasks also create great opportunities to sustain genuine and unscripted interaction between a student and other students or a student and an examiner (Gulikers et al. 2008; James & Casidy 2018; Sotiriadou et al., 2020). Integrating formative assessment effectively in online learning platforms has the potential to foster development of learner centered assessment (Nova, 2020; Pachler et al., 2010; Sorensen & Takle, 2005; Wang, et al., 2008).

Higher education researchers have focused on using online tasks mainly for formative language assessment. Incorporating a formative assessment cycle into a TBLT curriculum via authentic tasks provide continuous critical and constructive feedback both to the EFL teacher and learners, and this ongoing formative feedback guides teachers to make decisions about formulating ongoing instructional and assessment procedures and redesigning classroom tasks which is compatible with constructivist approach (Winke, 2010; Weaver & Esposto, 2012; Noroozi & Taheri, 2021).

Assessment of the Speaking Skills

Online Speaking Assessment

Not only all teaching and learning processes but also assessment of speaking skills of EFL learners at tertiary level have to be transferred into online platforms during the pandemic (Fitriani et al., 2020; Lisyowati et al., 2021; Mahapatra, 2021). Online synchronous speaking assessment has emerged as an alternative testing system to meet the demand of communicative aspects of language learning which is regarded as an essential component of 21st century skills (Leow et al., 2014, Nova, 2020, Okada et al., 2015; van Laar et al., 2020). During the synchronous assessment of students' speaking performance, they are required to express their ideas or opinions in spontaneous responses. Their responses are examined for a range of constructs such as pronunciation, accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and content of the speech (Alfehaid, 2018; Başak, 2019; Loranc-paszyk, 2015). Thus, implementing speaking exams synchronously via online video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and/or Microsoft Teams can accommodate a real-time interaction between lecturer and student. (Nova, 2020, Subrahmanyam & Bandu, 2021; Yee et al., 2021)

Technology has evolved and convenient online assessment methods have begun to take their place. There are two ways of assessing students' performance using the technology: exam-based summative assessment and task-based formative assessment. In exam-based summative assessment, students are mostly receptive and limited because they summarize learned material and are assigned a grade at the end of the course. It becomes difficult to assess invaluable skills such as creativity, productivity, and critical thinking, particularly through exams and tests (Learning, 2019; Uzun & Ertok, 2020). Task-based formative assessment which requires students to perform creative and productive tasks, on the other hand, entails technology-based tasks which are assigned through the internet, collected using online technology,

then assessed manually by the instructors. Likewise, technology has better enabled instructors to assign speaking tasks through technology-based format, but they still need to assess the results manually, or they may ask the students to do the self-assessment or peer-assessment. Therefore, performing and assessing tasks formatively require more time and procedure. Online speaking assessment and traditional assessment may seem similar in some respects since the instructors use various rubrics for assessing students' speaking skills as mentioned by some other researchers (Encalada & Sarmiento, 2019; Musa, 2001; Schreiber, et al., 2012; Yükselir & Kömür, 2017). The distinction is simply in the communication platforms employed, as speaking may be done immediately in a traditional classroom, whereas in online courses, students need to upload their tasks as a necessary component of web-based e-portfolios (generally videos they shoot) to digital platforms and applications like Google Classroom, Google drive, MS Teams and to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp (Shofatunnisa et al., 2021; Wibowo & Novitasari, 2021). Web-based e-portfolios and web-based learning management systems (LMS) like Edmodo which promote collaborative learning are also useful tools for online formative assessment (Gikandi et al., 2011; Köroğlu, 2021). Examining students' perspectives on the practice of online speaking assessment is a neglected area of research (Joughin 2007). Thus, it is important to gather students' views to enable instructors to reflect good online teaching practices.

Challenges in Implementing Online Formative Task-based Speaking Assessment

Integrating technology into language learning has brought new insights but it also brought challenges. Research has further explored some of the challenges that are specifically associated with implementing an effective online speaking assessment. Assessing speaking online has raised many questions about whether it can be effectively implemented in an online format.

Traditional ways of assessing speaking are still applicable when assessing online. However, concerns have been voiced in the educational contexts regarding the potential challenges of task-centered language assessment since it is one of the most important and challenging ways of assessing learners' speaking skills. Such concerns include: the problem of designing, developing and implementing the right assessment technique, the problem of ensuring academic integrity during online invigilated exams through preventing cheating and experiencing technical problems like having bad or low internet connection (Ogange, et al., 2018; Okada & Scott, 2015; Wibowo & Novitasari, 2021). Another problem experienced by the students is the disturbance in the environment of the student (Shofatunnisa et al., 2020; Nova, 2020). For the assessment to be fair, reliable and valid, TBLA requires raters to assess the quality of examinees' spoken language using a well-established rating scale (Turner & Upshur, 2002). To achieve desired outcomes from assessing the speaking skills of learners, the first and foremost step is good planning, organization, and administration (Paker & Höl, 2012). Both students and teachers must be prepared to understand the entire process, including types of test items: tasks, speaking rubric, and procedures as testing speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging of all language tests to prepare, administer, and score (Madsen, 1983, p.147). Speaking exams have turned into the most challenging and stressful part of the language exams for the students during this pandemic time. They are assessed virtually first one by one and then two as a pair through the tasks they are expected to talk about. Thus, there are some external and internal factors that can interfere with their performances such as concentration (Paker & Höl, 2012; Shofatunnisa et al., 2020), self-confidence (Duque-Aguilar; Köroğlu, 2021; Paker & Höl, 2012), time management (Broeckelman-Post, et al., 2019; Karataş & Tuncer, 2020; Paker & Höl, 2012; Zia & Norrihan, 2015), task difficulty (Bachman, 2002; Fulcher & Reiter, 2003; González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Piccardo & Berchoud, 2011; Subrahmanyam & Bandu, 2021),

mismatch between the pairs (Foot, 1999; Norton, 2005; Saville & Hargreaves, 1999), the attitudes of interlocutors during the assessment process (Dings, 2014; Fan & Yan, 2020; Genç et al., 2020; Paker & Höl, 2012; Phaiboonnugulkij & Prapphal, 2013). Therefore, it is expected that these factors will have a positive effect so that the student can perform well in the exam.

Assessing student success is important for teachers to get feedback on what and how students are thinking and accomplishing in the classroom. Not only teachers but also learners can benefit from formative task-based language assessment (FTBLA) due to the fact that teachers can identify the strengths and weaknesses of learners and give feedback and/or support to them. Thus, inviting students to reflect on assessment processes for their learning is of utmost importance. Accordingly, the current study examines how preparatory class students perceive the use of online OFTBA in monitoring their progress in their speaking skills. It focuses on clarifying the actual personal experiences and voices of preparatory school EFL learners on OFTBA in their progress in speaking skill during this EDE process, which is accepted as an important facet of the assessment cycle of the 21st century. The results of the study will provide windows for all instructors of languages at all universities in Turkey about OFTBSA because the COVID-19 pandemic has given higher education institutions the opportunity to lay the groundwork for different assessment techniques to be implemented. To be more precise, this study will provide the following practical significance and valuable information for the stakeholders—students, academicians, syllabus designers, material developers and policymakers: (1) Results will serve as input for the universities to develop online learning assessment competencies of instructors; (2) It will also help universities improve their evaluation of 21st-century learning in order to cope with the online learning modality and finally (3) the results will be used as input for instructors to sustain the development of online language assessment approaches and techniques.

The idea for this study was generated during EDE as a result of what the researcher experienced. The researcher was delivering a speaking course and he experienced difficulties in applying content and assessment techniques on online platforms. The researcher was also going through the problem of reticence with his students in his classes during this process. Since EDE was a new process for both the researcher and the students, the researcher felt that the development of his students' speaking skills was falling behind, and he decided to search for students' perspectives about sustaining and assessing their progress in their speaking skills. Thereupon, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ.1. What are the perspectives and experiences of EFL preparatory class learners on the online implementation of formative task-based assessment of their speaking skills?

RQ.2. What are the perspectives and experiences of EFL preparatory class learners on the advantages and disadvantages of online implementation of formative task-based approach in the assessment of their speaking skills?

RQ.3. What are the suggestions of EFL preparatory class learners to increase the effectiveness of OFTBSA?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Model/Design

Qualitative case study design was used to scrutinize the perspectives and experiences of the preparatory class students on online formative task-based assessment of their speaking skills. Creswell and Poth (2016) states that "Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a

bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes (p.73).

3.2. *Participants and Setting*

During the 2021-2022 Academic Fall Semester, 70 preparatory school students, 36 of whom were male (51.9 %) and 34 of whom were female (48.1 %) enrolled at Bursa Uludag University School of Foreign Languages were involved in the study. Their age varied between 17 to 20 years old. For online learning, the majority of students (90.2%) preferred to utilize their smartphones. Students receive 26 hours of intensive English lessons per week. Integrated skills-focused preparatory class design model, which is action oriented and compliant with CEFR and its learning outcomes is implemented online in this institution. Within this modular system, 4 lecturers share 3 classes. Each semester consists of 2 quarters. In the 1st, 2nd and 3rd quarters, a Language Hub course-book is taught and in the 4th quarter of spring Semester, *Oxford Q Skills* is taught. In the second quarter of fall semester in which the research was conducted, as an alternative assessment, the students were required to complete a speaking portfolio in which they must include two types of tasks, speaking practice tasks which were preferred to be done in pairs and speaking assessment tasks, which would be graded quantitatively and qualitatively.

As for speaking portfolios, there must be 5 student-generated videos as speaking practice tasks, 2 videos as speaking assessment tasks both of which will be done individually and, one of which will be a presentation in a video format, and a letter of reflection in the students' portfolios at the end of the quarter. The videos should be about three-five minutes long. The tasks which will be evaluated according to a rubric have to be completed and uploaded to the online platform. Google Classroom by the students by the due dates. There is 1 mid-term and 2 Quizzes in each quarter. The speaking parts of mid-term and quizzes must be parallel to the contents of the tasks performed throughout the quarters (See Appendix A). Speaking exams are conducted virtually via ZOOM. The order of the steps for speaking exam proceeds as follows:

- The interlocutor shares the screen (PPT).
- The students enter the meeting and wait in the waiting room until the interlocutor admits the students as a pair.
- The interlocutor admits the students as a pair.
- The exam has two tasks. For each task, students are supposed to speak in pairs.
- Students will read and think for two minutes for each task for preparation.
- Students are supposed to express their opinions on the given topics using the structures, the vocabulary, and the pronunciation they studied during the lessons.
- The pair leaves the meeting.
- Both of the instructors grade the students' performance based on the given criteria.
- The instructors negotiate if they have 10 points or above discrepancy.

3.3. *Instruments*

The main data collection instrument was an open-ended questionnaire with three questions which were formed in line with the research questions of the study (see Appendix B). Furthermore, an online focus group interview with 15 students via Zoom was utilized to delve into their perspectives and experiences pertaining to the online task-based assessment approach and to triangulate the results that emerged from the open-ended questionnaire. The interview questions were formed based on the results of the open-ended questionnaire. The interview questions were first checked by an expert with PhD and revised by the researcher considering the suggestions of the expert. The following interview questions were asked to

explore preparatory school students' perspectives and experiences about online formative task-based assessment of their speaking skills during EDE.

1. Did you get a high or low grade on the exam? If you got a low grade, what do you think the reason was for it?
2. What were the factors that affected your performance during the speaking exam?
3. In what ways did factors such as teachers, tasks, materials, online platforms affect your performance during the exam?
4. What was the role of the teacher during this online assessment process?
5. How did the teachers affect you during the exam? In what ways?

3.4. Procedure

A written structured- open ended questionnaire which was created via Google Forms was sent to the students after getting approval from the ethical committee of Bursa Uludag University. The open-ended survey was carried out in two weeks after students completed all their exams and portfolios towards the end of the term.

During online focus group interview process, the researcher hosted, as a moderator, 2 group meetings with 5-7 interviewees via Zoom which has a 40-minute time limit. The interviews for each participant lasted approximately 5 minutes. The total time recorded was reported as 80 minutes. Their participation was truly on a voluntary basis and their answers were kept anonymous. The interviews were in participants' native language. Watching and listening to the recorded meetings, the researcher translated the talks in English and transcribed them as the texts. The translated scripts were sent back to the interviewees who would be asked to accept or reject their expressions in the transcripts to ensure the trustworthiness of the transcripts and to enhance the validity of the transcript. The interviews and their transcriptions took nearly 1 week to be completed. Are there any further points/comments you want to add? If so, what are they?

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

The data obtained from the open-ended questionnaire were analyzed through Weft QDA (Weft QDA, 2007), a qualitative data storage programme, freely available in the public domain. Through this programme, codes were defined and refined over time. At first categorization, the researcher considered the key words involved in the open ended questions. After marking all the expressions including the codes, the researcher reviewed coding and re-indexed the documents by adding themes under the aforementioned codes. Furthermore, as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994), the codes were identified separately by another researcher with PhD in ELT to identify compliance percentage to ensure the reliability of the study. The compliance percentage is calculated as follows: $\text{reliability} = \frac{\text{number of agreements}}{\text{total number of agreements} + \text{disagreements}} \times 100$ (p.64). Based on this formula, the compliance percentage between the two encoders was found to be 85% for the codes and 78% for the themes of the codes, which means that the coding process was reliable.

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Triangulation also has been viewed as a qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources (Carter et al., 2014). Deductive content analysis was used to analyze the interview extracts so as to test concepts and categories emerged from the analysis of the open-ended questionnaire (Kyngas et al., 2019).

3.6. Ethical considerations

The study was conducted after getting approval from the ethical committee of Bursa Uludag University. In addition, the respondents also filled out a data privacy agreement form. They were told that their participation would not affect their grade in the class in any way, thus assuring the principle of non-maleficence (Creswell, 2014). The participants' real names were all be anonymised in the report to protect their confidentiality (Oliver, 2003).

4. Results

RQ.1. What are the perspectives and experiences of EFL preparatory class learners on the online implementation of formative task-based assessment of their speaking skills?

The findings of research question one showed that prep school students have mostly positive views and experiences on online formative task-based assessment of their speaking skills. Qualitative data indicated that most of the participants attributed the effectiveness of OFTBSA in terms of tasks (N= 37), affective factors (N=30), instructors (N=15), evaluation (N=10).

Firstly, the most frequently marked coding (N=37) with its various themes was 'tasks'. The participants described tasks by using the following terms such as useful (11), practice-oriented (10), collaborative (9), interactive (8), effective (8), and well-defined (7) as reported in the following extracts.

"Based on my experiences, I found the online implementation of speaking tasks very useful. Although we were studying online, we were doing a lot of speaking practice in our lessons, which was definitely very useful and the tasks also consisted of common topics from real life." (Interviewee 2)

"Tasks improved me a lot. My English is really good now. I had the opportunity to talk to my friends. Tasks helped us practice more." (Interviewee 9)

"Tasks provided us many benefits in terms of practicing both in group assignments and in individual assignments. For example, we were in constant interaction with our friends in pair and group work, and in this way, we improved our speaking by establishing mutual dialogues." (Interviewee 11)

"Speaking practice tasks contributed to my pronunciation. I gained fluency in the language as I practiced more" (Interviewee 11)

"Speaking assignments and exams were primarily explained in detail, instructions were clear so, when I was matched with my pair during the exam, I was comfortable because I knew what I had to do."

Secondly, the qualitative analysis revealed the code "affective factors" which mainly influenced participants' speaking performance (N=30) with the following themes such as self-confidence (N=12), inhibition (N=9), anxiety (N=8), fear for public speaking (7) and motivation (N=6) as some of interviewees mentioned in the following extracts:

"Personally, I felt anxious about the speaking assignments at first, but after doing them many times online, I was able to reduce my anxiety and did them more fluently and comfortably." (Interviewee 3)

"The more I practiced, the more my self-confidence came back. As I gained self-confidence, I started to make fewer mistakes. I was able to choose correct words and made fewer grammatical mistakes" (Interviewee 14)

“When I matched with my partner, if my partner was better than me, my mistakes would come to light and this made me more inhibited but as I practiced more with my friends and as a result of the feedback I received from my teacher, my shyness gradually disappeared.” (Interviewee 5)

“Although the task assignments and their evaluation put pressure on us, these assignments helped us to break our shyness to speak. At the end of the term, it had a great role in my speech, at least in trying to communicate without fear while speaking in front of others” (Interviewee 10)

“I learned from my friends that we will make presentations in English when we go to our departments next year. That's why the presentations we make here will provide us with great convenience in the next part of our academic life. Therefore, I am ready to move on to my department and I am highly motivated.” (Interviewee 2)

In the third phase of qualitative analysis, the coding “instructors” (N=15) was divided into two themes such as digitally literate (N=8) and facilitator (N=7). When asked to comment on their instructors, most students gave positive opinions about them as seen below.

“Our teacher had a good command of digital elements. He could easily use almost all digital tools and applications, and he was telling us how to use it and what we should do, by clearly showing and getting it done.” (Interviewee 9)

“These online-based assignments required more preparation, yes, we had difficulties in some parts. For example, there were times when we couldn't get the recording, we had to start talking again, and we had to shoot videos again and again due to technical problems like slow or bad internet connection. This could cause problems especially in team-works. But to talk about the good sides, our instructors didn't mind them, he extended the homework time and gave us additional time. They were very understanding and showed us our grammar mistakes and wrong word usage one by one in the video we shot, by pausing it each time, which made our work very easy for our next assignments.” (Interviewee 11)

As for the coding “evaluation”, it was marked 10 times in the qualitative documents. The interviewees described evaluation as fair (5) and comprehensive (5) as seen in the extracts below.

“The evaluation of the tasks was fairly fair. We got the grades we deserve. The evaluation process was already quite clear and precise. We knew from the very beginning how we would be evaluated” (Interviewee 3)

Interviewee 5: “Our teachers were evaluating our tasks according to the rubric in their hands, so there was no question mark in our minds, anyway, the rubric was very comprehensive and consisted of 5 parts such as task fulfillment, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar.”

RQ.2. What are the perspectives and experiences of EFL preparatory class learners on the advantages and disadvantages of online implementation of formative task-based approach in the assessment of their speaking skills?

Analysis of qualitative findings reveal that participants reported the benefits of online implementation of FTBA of their speaking skills as practicality (20), improvement in speaking skills (15), cost saving (10) and stress-relieving (10). A few samples indicating some of the aforementioned pros of online TBFA of speaking skills are reported as follows:

“One of the biggest advantages for me was the location. I could participate in the online exam anywhere convenient through the Internet and camera. It was a great feeling.” (Interviewee 2)

“The tasks were presented to us in the ppt format on the screen. They were clear and understandable and we could easily read, reply and talk about them in the exam.” (Interviewee 11)

“We were able to work on our tasks wherever we were before we submitted them. It was so practical.” (Interviewee 6)

“I had a lot of grammar and pronunciation errors on my first speaking tasks. However, I was able to detect my errors after I received instant feedback from my instructor. These feedbacks improved my pronunciation and fluency a lot. They provided the opportunity to do better in the next tasks.” (Interviewee 14)

“We didn’t have to go to school. Going to school would take our energy, both materially and spiritually. Most of our time would be spent on the roads, and it would be costly. It was so good to be online. We were able to do our tasks comfortably in our comfort areas.” (Interviewee 1)

“I think that we would be more stressed in face to face assessments with the physical presence of the examiner. He would be observing us all the time and it would be somehow more stressful for us and we would be more excited.” (Interviewee 4)

Conversely, participants underlined a few notable disadvantages of online implementation of TBFSAs such as technological problems (55), surrounding disturbance (15), inequality of opportunity (15), and academic integrity (8). Two themes emerged from the coding of “technological problems”. They were: “poor internet connection” (55), technical glitches (20): These points were mentioned below:

Interviewee 7: “We were always in a state of unease in exams, in case our internet went out. This situation inevitably reflected on our performance. We weren’t able to perform very well because of bad internet connection”

Interviewee 14: “We sometimes had difficulty in understanding each other because we had problems accessing the internet. At the same time, if one party's internet was bad, the other party had to wait for him/her, which caused a waste of time. If the situation did not improve, it was necessary to change partners.”

Interviewee 10: “Sometimes, the other party could not hear and see us due to the microphone and/or the camera being broken. As the camera had to be kept open during the exam, technical failures of this kind were causing great concern for us.”

Participants also reported the issue of surrounding disturbance which negatively affected their performance. A few students admitted that they were really disturbed by the noise coming from outside as stated below.

(Interviewee 5): “I start to record the video with my full voice, at that moment the crying sounds of the neighbor's child or the shouts of the marketer from outside echo in my room. Sometimes my mom's kitchen noises or her scolding my sister can ruin everything.”

Another negative aspect of OTBFSAs arising from the participants’ responses was that there was a huge inequality of opportunity among students as noted by the extract below.

Interviewee 11: “Not everyone has a computer or a good cell phone. If you have a computer, it may malfunction sometimes, if it is not a good thing, or when you have to connect with the phone, your battery may run out or you may experience audio or video problems. If your technical equipment is very good, the probability of you encountering these problems is very low.”

As for academic integrity, some participants acknowledged that online learning facilitated blatant cheating as quoted below:

Interviewee 7: “It was good for me to shoot online speaking videos for my speaking practice and assessment task assignments, but some friends and even many people turned this into their own advantage and pasted the paper on the screen and read it or made copies in various ways, which is a huge disadvantage in my opinion.

RQ.3. What are the suggestions of EFL preparatory class learners to increase the effectiveness of OFTBSA?

Participants provided some suggestions with regard to the usefulness and effectiveness of online TBFSAs. Four themes emerged from the participants' responses such as holding speaking exams face-to-face due to internet-related problems (25), providing plenty of practice for the speaking exams (15), partner matching (10), and task difficulty (8).

The results showed that students are not satisfied with online exams. They prefer face-to-face exams for the reasons stated below.

Interviewee 3: “We do the tasks online, it is practical, but the fact that the exams are online makes it very difficult for us. We feel like the internet connection is hanging by a thread, it's making us nervous.”

Interviewee 9: “Exams must be face-to-face, as this creates inequality of opportunity. Not everyone can have a proper internet, laptop or computer at home. If the exams are to be held online, the authorities should find a solution. They should provide unlimited internet access to all students”

Furthermore, they maintained that there is a pressing need for more tasks that prepare them for the exams.

“Although we do task assignments for the speaking portfolio throughout the semester, we should be prepared for the exams by having plenty of practice with tasks suitable for the exam content.” (Interviewee 12)

Participants also stated that there was a problem with their partner pairings and made the following recommendations:

“Sometimes, a friend whose English is very good can be matched with a friend whose English is very bad. Although this seems advantageous, the ready-responsiveness of a friend with good English can intimidate the other side. Therefore, it should be noted that there are no large gaps between partners. As a solution, maybe the people can be interviewed one by one and they can be given the opportunity to talk to each other individually, or the person can determine his/her own partner in order to feel comfortable.” (Interviewee 1)

The results also revealed that there was inequality in the distribution of task difficulty. Students expressed their dissatisfaction with this issue and they suggested the following as a solution:

“Some of our friends are very lucky. The tasks are either coming out of the tasks they have practiced before or that they have knowledge of. On the other hand, I come across tasks that do not interest me or that I have no knowledge of, such as space. In my opinion, more than one task alternative should be presented to the student so that the student can choose what he/she wants and express his/her thoughts on that subject easily.” (Interviewee 7)

Another interviewee proposed that:

“I think the first of the 2 tasks could be easy to make the student a little more comfortable.” (Interviewee 13)

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to provide comprehensive evaluation of OFTBSA, and overall, the results showed that OTBFSA bears positive outcomes for students which is consistent with the findings of the studies by Alzamil (2021), Korkmaz (2019).

Research question one which sought to find out the perspectives and experiences of EFL preparatory class learners on the online implementation of FTBA of their speaking skills revealed mostly positive opinions in terms of tasks, affective domains, instructors and assessment. Students found the practice and assessment tasks assigned for speaking portfolio and the tasks asked in the exam very useful, practice-oriented, collaborative, interactive, effective, and well-defined.

The findings of the study revealed that tasks are specifically useful tools to engage learners in the language classrooms in which learners use the language more creatively, spontaneously and communicatively as implied in the findings of the study by Masuram and Sripada (2020).

EFL preparatory class learners stated that tasks which were practiced-oriented improved their speaking skills. This finding is in line with those of Masuram and Sripada (2020), which indicated that with the help of practice-oriented tasks, the undergraduate students performed the tasks and activities individually and in groups to develop their English communication skills in real-life situations.

Tasks promote collaborative learning which is also reported in the studies by Baralt and Morcillo (2017), Masuram and Sripada (2020) stating that students' listening to and discussing each other's points of view while doing authentic tasks fosters a sense of collaboration.

The results also showed that tasks are effective with regard to developing students' communication skills which is in parallel with the study by Masuram and Sripada (2020), Phaiboonnugulkij and Prapphal (2013) that tasks make learners contemplate and strategize while interacting with one another to reach an outcome.

Lastly, the results indicated that the tasks should be well-defined and described in terms of not creating any enigmas on the part of the student and staying within the framework of the task. Qualitative findings with regard to the aforementioned points corroborate the findings of Höl (2010), López-Pastor and Sicilia-Camacho (2017) who reported that tasks should be described clearly and concisely to avoid misinterpretation, misunderstanding and confusion during the speaking exam.

Another notable finding was that students' speaking performance was positively affected by affective factors such as self-confidence, inhibition, anxiety, fear for public speaking, and motivation. They mentioned that as they practiced more via online speaking assignments, they gained self-confidence, became less inhibited, were less anxious, and they were able to overcome their fear of public speaking. The importance of practice was also reported by Grieve et al. (2021). Similarly, Köroğlu (2021) declared that digital formative assessment reduces speaking anxiety and stress of students due to authenticity and rich content of the tasks. This finding, however, contradicts those of Akimov and Malin, (2020), Grieve et al. (2021), Okada, et al. (2015), Nova (2020), Shraim (2019) which indicated that online exams increased stress and anxiety levels of students because of some reasons.

The results of the study also clearly revealed that students were really satisfied with their instructors during the exam. They maintained that instructors were really friendly and helpful and they took their

stress away, they relaxed them. This finding is similar to the findings of Duque-Aguilar (2021), Höl (2010), Mahapatra (2021), Ounis (2017), Yu et al. (2021). They added that their instructors' scaffolding them by giving instant feedback during their online task assignments allowed them to perform the tasks successfully as mentioned by Sotiriadou et al. (2020). Prep school students also posited that their instructors were competent at administering online speaking exams as stressed by Akimov and Malin, (2020), Hol and Aydin (2020).

The last theme emerged from the qualitative data for the first research question was evaluation. EFL learners' perceptions of being assessed by their instructors mostly yielded positive results. They claimed that as they as, examinees and their instructors as, raters were acquainted with each other, and they were assessed based on a rating scale, they had no doubt in their minds that they would be judged fairly, objectively and comprehensively which indicated the similar results with the studies by Akimov and Malin (2020), Hırçın Çoban (2017), Höl (2010). Furthermore, they added that the scoring criteria were clearly defined and explained in detail beforehand by their instructors to create valid and reliable assessment as emphasized by Hatipoğlu (2017b).

The second research question which was formed to reveal EFL preparatory class learners' perspectives and experiences on the advantages and disadvantages of online implementation of formative task-based approach in the assessment of their speaking skills indicated that taking exams online offered students several important advantages and disadvantages. First of all, students agreed that online assessment was practical particularly with respect to location. They were able to take exams from any convenient place like their or their friends' home, dormitory, apart etc. This result is in line with the one reported by Okada & Scott (2015). Furthermore, one of the most striking findings of the study was that the task assignments they did during the semester helped learners to improve their ability to speak fluently and accurately with their partners and interlocutors during the online exams which indicated the similar results with the studies by Kusumawati (2020), Syakur et al. (2020), Phaiboonnugulkij and Prapphal (2013). Students opined that the use of online assessment saved them a lot of time and money as their school has discontinued in-person speaking exams. This finding is aligned with those of several studies (Baleni, 2015; Dreher et al., 2011; Okada & Scott, 2015; Shraim, 2019). Findings in this study also highlighted students' preference for online exams rather than face-to-face exams due to its being stress-free. They stated that a variety of authentic tasks presented during the assessment phase reduced their speaking anxiety and stress since the tasks accomplished during the term and the tasks asked in the exam were parallel in terms of content. The findings correspond with the studies of Akimov and Malin (2020), Köroğlu (2021).

The study also aimed to investigate EFL preparatory class learners' perspectives and experiences on the disadvantages of online implementation of formative task-based approach in the assessment of their speaking skills. A few noteworthy disadvantages were highlighted by students such as technological problems, surrounding disturbance, inequality of opportunity, and cheating as a form of academic dishonesty. The findings revealed in this study demonstrated that communication breakdowns, such as the inability to hear you from the other party due to a bad or weak internet connection, were among the factors that the students complained about the most and had the most difficulty. These findings are pertinent to the studies of Fitriani et al. (2020), Köroğlu (2021), Mahapatra (2021), Nova (2020), Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021). The students also stated that the noise coming from outside or the noise of other individuals in the house made them very uncomfortable and that they had difficulty in performing their tasks and that they had to videotape them again and again. The results in this study regarding the issue of surrounding disturbance are consistent with the studies by Höl (2010), Karataş and Tuncer (2020), Nova

(2020), Okada et al. (2015). Another striking finding of this study was that not all students have access to technology that allows them to participate in online lessons. They declared that online learning is hampered by poor internet connection, their lack of sound technological equipments such as quality computers, mobile phones, headphones etc., and expensive internet quotas. This result is in agreement with the studies of Karataş and Tuncer (2020), Okada et al. (2015), van Laar et al. (2020). The last theme to come to from the third research question is cheating as a form of academic dishonesty. A few students reported that albeit a small number of them, some students looked at the pieces of paper affixed to the side of the screen and read from there and did their tasks in short-cut ways without working on them. This kind of blatant cheating practices have also been mentioned in the studies by Akimov and Malin (2020), Alzamil (2021), Shraim (2019), Sotiriadou et al. (2020).

The last research question aimed to delineate EFL prep class students' suggestions to increase the effectiveness of online TBFSAs. Participants made some important suggestions pertaining to the effectiveness of online TBFSAs: holding exams face-to-face due to internet-related problems, providing lots of practice for the exams, balancing partner pairings, and setting the task difficulty. First of all, although a substantial number of students were happy to submit their tasks online, they expressed their opinions in favor of face-to-face speaking exams, especially due to internet-related problems. In the studies of Elsalem et al. (2021), Nova (2020), Uluöz (2020), the disruptions caused by the internet were also seen as the biggest obstacle to online exams and participants, therefore, preferred face-to-face exams. Hence, if online education and assessment will be a part of our lives from now on, as it seems, all these technical problems must be fixed. The results also showed that although students prepared so many tasks during the semester for their portfolio assessment, they asked for task samples that were similar to the contents of the tasks in the exam. This finding corroborates the findings of Akimov and Malin (2020), Gan & Leung (2020), Höl (2010), Köroğlu (2021), Ogange et al. (2018) in which they stated that instructors should employ particularly practice tests beforehand to scaffold learners about what would be assessed. Another finding that had to be taken into account was the problems experienced in pairing. The students asserted that there was no balance in partner pairings. To clarify, those with a very low level can match with a very good level, or two students with a very bad level can become partners. In both cases, it creates some disadvantages. In the first, the student with a very good level can put pressure on the other and becomes unable to speak at all, in the other, since both are in a very bad level, they cannot be the driving force for each other, and the conversation is blocked and cannot take a step forward. Therefore, these aforementioned factors should be taken into account in partner matches so that students can show their real performances in a comfortable environment without tension. The findings are in line with the studies of Fan & Yan (2020) where assertive test takers were matched with non-assertive test takers, and ultimately the former got higher scores than latter one from the examiners. Moreover, the former group strove to be the leaders in the interactions, which affected the flow of interaction negatively. The last theme emerged from this research question was task difficulty. To reiterate, some students claimed that some of their friends had easy tasks and but they had difficult tasks in some speaking exams, so they stated that the difficulty level of the tasks should be adjusted well and they hoped that the tasks with medium difficulty would come up in the exam. This finding is in parallel with the finding in the studies by Höl (2010) in which he stated that the items or tasks in the test should reflect what is intended to test in terms of ensuring content validity. They should not be too easy or too difficult. Teachers should make sure that tasks are sequenced in order of increasing difficulty as implied by Subrahmanyam Vellanki & Bandu (2021). Tasks should cover what has been learnt during the entire semester. In addition, in her doctoral dissertation, Scasserra (2008) examined the scores of the partners and the results revealed that

the proportion of those who answered correctly to the medium difficulty task questions was higher than the ones who gave correct answers to the difficult ones.

6. Conclusion

Not only the quality of course content and learning platforms, but also the types of online assessment techniques used during the COVID-19 pandemic appeared as one of the vital factors of online learning to achieve the desired learning outcomes in the online modality which has become new pedagogic landscape for university students and instructors.

Although students underwent an unexpected kind of experience regarding online speaking assessment due to the lingering effect Covid-19 on education, the study indicated that learners of English at a preparatory school benefited a lot from online assessment of their speaking skills. The experiences that students at tertiary level gained during this process showed that they were much more motivated by and ready for their speaking skills' being assessed online. This study yielded significant findings for instructors in higher education institutions who would like to implement online formative task-based assessment of speaking skills more effectively and inclusively. This case study clearly demonstrated that with regard to challenges, the key barrier that was pointed out by vast majority of students was low or poor internet connection. Hence, the study signified the importance of empowering EFL learners to become digitally competent examinees by providing them with stress-free online assessment environment. Thus, it is important that government/educational institutions should adopt appropriate policies and plans to run assessments online effectively. Accordingly, they should provide free internet and free digital gadgets to all learners to mitigate digital divide among them. In addition, instructors should make sound instructional and educational decisions underpinning assessment of 21st century skills by deliberating over the students' perspectives and experiences of online formative assessment of their speaking skills during COVID-19.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study has several limitations that can provide a basis for future studies. Firstly, the number of the interviewees and the questions forwarded to the students can be increased. Secondly, the interviews can be conducted by anonymous and/or neutral persons rather than the instructor himself. Furthermore, the data gathered were limited to the students' perspectives and experiences in this study. Therefore, further research can be conducted to examine the perspectives and experiences of students and instructors from other universities to view the issue from a broad perspective by including more stakeholders.

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Appendices

Appendix A: SAMPLE TASKS

Pair 1

Task 1
Talk about behaviour on public transport



Student A: Describe picture 1.
 What are they doing?



Student B: Describe picture 2.
 What is he doing?

Student A & B: Ask and answer the following questions in turns.

- What do you like/dislike doing when you are travelling?
- Have you ever experienced an annoying behaviour on public transport?

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Pair 1

Task 2 **Ask for, offer and respond to help**



Batgirl



Joker

Student A: You are going to a costume party on Saturday and you need a costume. Choose **one** of the costumes in the pictures. Ask your friend to help you.

Student B: You have a costume shop. Your friend wants you to help him/her to choose a costume to wear at a costume party on Saturday. Respond to his/her help.

- Create a conversation together and speak in turns.
- Include some of the words below:

favour could shall would mind

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Appendix B

	<p>EFL preparatory class learners' perspectives and experiences with regard to the online formative task-based assessment of their speaking skills</p> <p>Dear Preparatory Class Students!</p> <p>This open-ended questionnaire aims to investigate your perspectives and experiences about online formative task-based assessment of your speaking skill.</p> <p>Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The researcher requests your consent for participation in this study. Please put "X" under the correct options for you. I would be very happy if you could share your demographic information in addition to your perspectives and experiences about online task-based assessment of your speaking skill. Thanks for your contribution!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Instructor Sedat KORKMAZ</p>
	Part 1: Consent Items
	<p>Please tick the correct options for you!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ I agree to participate in this study. I am aware of the purpose of the study and I am participating voluntarily. Yes () No () ❖ I grant permission for the data generated from this questionnaire to be used in the researcher's publication. Yes () No ()
	Part 2: Demographic Information
	<p>Please tick the correct options for you!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Gender: Female () Male () ❖ Department: ❖ Age: ❖ What is your means of access to distance education? Please specify: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Desktop computer () Laptop () Mobile phone () Tablet () Others ()
	Part 3: Open-ended questions
1	What are your perspectives and experiences about the online implementation of formative task-based assessment of your speaking skills?
2	What are the advantages and disadvantages of online implementation of formative task-based assessment of your speaking skills?
3	What are your suggestions to increase the effectiveness of online implementation of formative task-based assessment of your speaking skills?