

ASSESSMENT OF ORAL SKILLS IN UPPER
SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN FINLAND:
Teachers' view

Bachelor's thesis
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HUMANISTINEN TIEDEKUNTA
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Kielitaidon arviointi on oleellinen osa kielenopetusta. Kieli ja kielitaito koostuvat erilaisista osista; kirjallisesta ja suullisesta taidosta sekä kuuntelun ymmärtämisestä. Jokainen näistä osa-alueista vaatii omanlaisensa opetustavat sekä arviointiasteikot tasapuolisen ja pysyvän arvioinnin mahdollistamiseksi. Suullisen kielitaidon arviointi vaatii erityisesti aikaa sekä nopeaa reagointia opettajan puolelta, sillä mikäli tilannetta ei nauhoiteta, voi opettaja arvioida vain yhtä suoritusta kerrallaan. Erityisen hankalaa suullisen kielitaidon arviointi on normaalissa luokkahuonetilanteessa, jossa paikalla on useita oppilaita. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy tutkimaan suullisen kielitaidon arviointia englanninkielen oppitunneilla lukiotasolla.

Tutkimukseen käytettiin materiaalina nettikyselyä johon vastasi 32 lukion englanninkielen opettajaa eri puolelta Suomea. Kysely koostui monivalintakysymyksistä sekä kahdesta avoimesta kysymyksestä. Kyselyssä kartoitettiin opettajien mielipiteitä suullisen kielitaidon arvioinnista englanninkielessä sekä sitä, mihin opettajat eniten keskittyvät arvioidessaan suullista kielitaitoa.

Tutkimuksessa kävi ilmi, että suurin osa opettajista kokee suullisen kielitaidon arvioinnin hankalaksi lähinnä ajan puutteen aiheuttamien ongelmien takia. Vastauksista kävi myös ilmi, ettei opettajilla ole yhtenäistä ohjeistusta suullisen kielitaidon arvioinnista, sillä vastaukset esimerkiksi siitä, kuinka usein opettajat sanoivat arvioivansa suullista kielitaitoa, vaihtelivat paljon. Eniten opettajat vastasivat keskittyvänsä arvioinnissa ääntämiseen, sanastoon, sisältöön ja keskustelutaitoihin. Näitä on suhteellisen helppo arvioida lyhyistäkin puheenvuoroista (keskustelutaitoihin liittyi esim. aloitteellisuus).

Toivottavasti lisätutkimuksen avulla pystyttäisiin kehittelemään keinoja, joilla yhtenäistettäisiin ja helpotettaisiin suullisen kielitaidon arviointia englanninkielessä. Tämä olisi tärkeää, sillä suullinen kielitaito on iso osa kielitaitoa, oppilaat kokevat sen tärkeäksi ja nykyisin opettajilla ei näytä olevan selkeitä, yhdenmukaisia arviointimenetelmiä, mikä taas johtaa eriävään opetukseen.

Asiasanat: Oral skills, assessment

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1 INTRODUCTION

In Finland there has long been discussion about how Finnish people speak English, and this discussion usually arouses strong feelings in people. The English Finnish people use is typically described as having no intonation, and with pronunciation being non-fluent. A typical example of this was in the national daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* in November 2008, when quite a heated discussion was had about the English some Finnish politicians use (*Helsingin Sanomat* 2008). Naturally, it is acceptable that there is accent in people's speech, but one also has to remember that it is vital that the speaker is understood and that the speaker understands others. However, oral skills have not usually been emphasized in Finnish schools.

Moreover, speaking skills are increasingly important in work life, and in Finland students have expressed the need for learning better oral skills in upper secondary school (Mäkelä 2005). Speaking skills are considered to be very crucial in foreign language learning (Knight 1992: 294, Mäkelä 2005: 109). For instance, Mäkelä (2005: 109) found in his study that 68% of Finnish upper secondary school students thought speaking to be the most important area of learning in English. Emphasizing oral skills in upper secondary schools in Finland has been a topic of conversation for almost two decades, for instance Yli-Renko (1991) found in his study that students felt that oral skills were not emphasized enough in upper secondary schools. The Finnish ministry of Education set up a working group in 2006 which proposed that one of the English courses in upper secondary schools should be turned into an oral course (*Lukiokoulutuksen suullisen kielitaidon arviointiryhmän muistio* 2006: 42). The proposal of this working group will become reality in 2010. However, this course will not be compulsory, even though it will give all the upper secondary school students a chance to choose at least one oral course. In contrast, since the course will not be compulsory, and as oral skills are not tested in the matriculation exam, how many students will actually choose to take this course, as it will be an extra course? Furthermore, although it is important to promote teaching of oral skills, it could be argued that it is not beneficial to split the language in parts, so that oral skills would only be taught in one course and the other courses would neglect the subject. Of course, totally neglecting oral skills in other courses is not even possible. As we can see, there is a clear need for better oral skills, but the means how to achieve them are still developing.

My study focuses on the assessment of oral skills, and I wanted to focus on everyday life situations in normal classrooms in upper secondary schools, and not in test situations because of the following reasons. Even though there has been a lot of discussion about the teaching of oral skills, and how more emphasis should be put on them, most of the studies relating the evaluating of oral skills focus on test situations, where the evaluating is easier to organise. Even though teachers can probably apply some of the methods used in these studies to everyday classroom situations, one still has to remember that classroom situations are quite different from oral test situations. Even though nowadays many people in Finland learn English outside schools, still a large number of Finnish people receive their foreign language education in classrooms and most of the feedback and evaluation they receive come from their teacher during those lessons. I wanted to ask how teachers find assessing speaking in everyday classroom situations where time and equipment are limited. Personally, I also find this topic interesting as I am studying to become a teacher.

Assessment of oral skills is a topic which has many interesting sides to it. First of all, for instance final exams/exercises in courses are normally written and not spoken, so it would imply that evaluating spoken language has to be done during lessons. Secondly, it is also usually thought that in upper secondary schools the main emphasis is to get the students through the matriculation examination where oral skills are not tested. This could mean that speaking skills are not that much emphasized during studies. Thirdly, assessing speaking in a normal classroom situation has some obvious problems, the main one having to do with time: how to assess the speaking skills of around 20 people if the situation is not recorded? Creating equal test or evaluation situations during lessons is also challenging. Moreover, speaking, especially in classrooms, is a public action which might cause anxiety etc. Fourth point is that assessing speaking requires different kind of exercises depending on whether one is assessing for instance grammar or pronunciation (Luoma, 2004). This sets requirements for the exercises used in classrooms: they need to be versatile enough and teachers need to know what those exercises focus on rehearsing. To sum up, assessing oral skills have numerous levels which need to be taken into consideration. That is why most of the studies focus on test situations where it is easier to focus on all those aspects. However, I think that those aspects should be taken into account in classrooms as well, and I hope to find out how teachers perceive this situation.

I decided to focus on upper secondary level because there has been a lot of discussion lately about teaching speaking skills in upper secondary school, and whether evaluating speaking skills should be part of the matriculation exam. Secondly, based on the national syllabus students should at upper secondary level be able to talk in English. This would suggest that there is something that teachers can assess. Thirdly, there has been a suggestion made that teaching oral skills in upper secondary school should be taught during an optional course (Lukiokoulutuksen suullisen kielitaidon arviointiryhmän muistio 2006: 42) so it will be interesting to see how teachers find assessing speaking before this course has become reality. I also feel that at least before, speaking and evaluating one's speaking skills was not emphasized in upper secondary school and it would be interesting to see how the situation has changed.

This paper is focused on normal English lessons in upper secondary schools and how the assessment of oral skills is done there. I am first going to explain the main terms relating my study and then I am going to look at previous studies and background information relating the nature of oral skills and assessment of oral skills. After this I am going to present my study questions and data and method used for this study. I am then going to move on to presenting the results of my study and after that I am going to analyse the results. Finally I am going to conclude my study with a chapter where I am going to have an overview of the whole study and present some final thoughts.

2 TERMINOLOGY ON ORAL SKILLS AND ASSESSMENT

The central concepts present in this paper are oral skills and assessment, and I am going to explain what these terms mean, in relation to my own study.

2.1 Oral skills

Firstly, the main idea of oral skills is that a person is capable of producing oral language, which can be understood by others. Whether a person is understood or not, consists of many factors. These factors are for instance pronunciation, vocabulary, stress, rhythm and coherence. If one of these factors is not as good as the others, it does not necessarily mean that the person is then not understood at all. However, oral skills can be estimated based on

these differences. Oral skills also possess a social dimension which I am going to look at closer further on.

2.3 Assessment

In my study I am going to talk about assessment in a school environment. There assessment is about using power over student and it should benefit the student by giving him/her something concrete and developing feedback on what he/she can improve in his/hers performance (Valkonen, 2003). In a school environment assessment should also be objective, fair and motivating.

3 PREVIOUS STUDIES ON ORAL SKILLS

Oral skills and assessment of them has been the focus of numerous studies, but most of them focus on assessing speaking in a test situation and not in a classroom situation (Knight 1992). Most of the studies also focus on investigating whether a particular test method is valid or not. Reason for this is mainly because assessing oral skills requires time and equipment (for instance tape/video recording). These are usually quite difficult to organize in a normal classroom situation, where the whole lesson is not focused on oral skills, and therefore the class is not in a language studio or the situation is not recorder in some other way.

However, in Finland there are few recent studies relating oral skills in classrooms. Riku Mäkelä (2005) has studied oral exercises in upper secondary school, and found that there are actually a lot of oral exercises in school books, and that students value speaking and listening skills highly. Mäkelä (2005) also found that teachers said that they do a lot of oral exercises during lessons, that young teachers value oral exercises more than older teachers, and that female teachers value oral skills more than male teachers. Mäkelä (2005) conducted his study by analysing the exercises in one school book set, and by conducting a questionnaire for 233 teachers and 375 students, and also by following few English lessons.

Tarja Valkonen (2003) studied upper secondary school students and their communication skills in Finnish. Valkonen (2003) focused in her study in the assessment of speaking skills by interviewing teachers (N=9), analyzing written essays by students (essays on speaking skills)

(N= 219) and conducting performance-based tests (N=10). One of the interesting points she found was that different evaluators use assessing scales differently. Valkonen (2003) suggests that this could probably be fixed with proper assessment training. Valkonen (2003: 265) also found out that one of the most difficult parts to assess, according to her participants, was assessing content and expression. I would assume that perhaps in English teachers might find other aspects of evaluating more difficult, because of the different pronunciation system, and of course it is different to assess English as a foreign language than someone's mother tongue.

3.1 Nature of oral skills

Naturally oral skills, like any other skills, have their own characteristics, which make them unique. I think it is important to look at these characteristics since it gives clear background for the assessment of oral skills. Producing oral language combines and requires different kind of skills, and one usually has to come up with whatever one wants to say quite quickly. Time is one of the main differences between oral skills and written skills, where one usually has time to think and rewrite. Valkonen (2008) describes speaking skill as personal, socially gradable and sensitive to situations, so it is always highly important to think about the speaking situation and the persons in it, while assessing speaking skills. This again can create problems in classrooms, where there are numerous students and complex social settings, which are not always visible for a teacher. Luoma (2004:9-10) points out several reasons why spoken language is different from written language, for instance the sound of speech, grammar, words and phrases. Spoken language also differs greatly in different situations, depending on whether the situation and the speech are planned or unplanned, formal or informal.

Another interesting point about the nature of oral language is slips and errors people make. Luoma (2004: 19) mentions few of the errors only non-native speakers make, like changing simple word order rules or using *no+verb* in order to produce negation in English (*I no eat*), but still all language users make mistakes and slips while talking. While assessing speech the difficulty is to separate simple slips, where the speaker knows how to express him/herself correctly, from actual mistakes, where the learner does not know that s/he has done a mistake, or s/he does not know how to correct that mistake. One also has to take into consideration the social pressure some students, especially shy ones, might feel in a classroom, and how that pressure might influence his/her output. They might be more influenced by simple slips.

Luoma (2004: 11-28) mentions that speech differs in different situations. What kind of situations are classrooms? What kind of a norm is expected? And most importantly do students know what that norm is? Of course classrooms vary massively in their atmosphere and their activity, it is impossible to find two exactly the same kind of classes because there are so many variables present in a classroom. However, some generalisations can probably be made and I would assume that in classrooms speaking situations are usually more on the formal side, and the spoken language students use is somewhat limited. Relating this, Luoma (2004) also mentions how speaking is different when it is read from a paper or when it is produced without any ready material. If a student is for instance reading a text out loud, it does not give the teacher the whole view of the student's oral skills. Another point about this is when students simply answer to a question presented by the teacher. Again only a part of the students' oral skills is presented, mainly pronunciation and vocabulary skills.

3.2 Assessment of oral skills

Syllabus for upper secondary schools currently determines that rehearsing oral skills should be included in all courses, which means that assessing oral skills need to be included in all courses as well. However, the syllabus does not give detailed guidelines for the assessment (Lukiokoulutuksen suullisen kielitaidon arviointiryhmän muistio, 2006: 11).

The level that is meant to be required in English if a student has been studying it from third grade to upper secondary school is B2.1 (see Appendix 1 for a detailed description). This means that the student should be able to use the language independently and for instance be able to use the language in an argumentative way (see Appendix 1 for detailed information).

Assessing spoken language can be divided into two main ways. One can either look at language in a holistic way, or then one can divide the language into pieces (grammar, pronunciation etc.) and look at them separately, which is called an analytic way of assessing (Bachman 1991: 301-330). Holistic way means assessing the situation overall, and how the subject handles and performs in a situation that is being assessed. Holistic way of assessing is based on the idea that we cannot see grammatical, or other language function that take place inside one's mind, so therefore we cannot judge them. We have to judge the functions we are able to observe: the learner's ability to perform in a given task. Analytic way of assessing

means looking at certain, predetermined points, for instance pronunciation, rhythm etc. According to Knight (1992: 300), teachers should focus on using the latter way of assessing, since it is important that the teachers know what exactly needs to be improved in the learners speech, and that they are able to give instructive feedback. Valkonen (2003: 189) also talks about the different aspects of assessing language in a holistic or analytic way. She mentions how in a quick classroom situation it is difficult to give analytic feedback and how it is possible that if there are clear analytic instructions for the assessment, it might actually interfere the assessing process, when only certain things are being looked at. However, Valkonen (2003:190) supports the analytic way of assessing, since it is based on the idea, that it is possible to master different areas of language with different ability and teachers should be able to give correct feedback for all of these areas. In my study I also focused on the analytic way of assessing oral skills, since I wanted to find out clear, detailed answers and not big, overall impressions.

According to Knight (1992), assessing speaking skills can cause problems in a classroom situation for instance because of the following reasons: assessing oral skills requires time and equipment, the problem of finding productive and relevant tasks, and the problem of assessing students in a consistent way, even though the situations change. Bachman (1991: 39) also mentions the huge amount of variations found in almost every language, so who decides what norm we choose to look at, when assessing the language students produce. Most importantly, do the students know what is expected of them and how those expectations might influence the student and his/hers output?

A debate of its own is had about whether it is justified to use native speakers as a base for assessment. If native speakers would be the base of assessment it would be difficult to decide which native speakers we choose to look at, since there are numerous styles of English spoken as a native language. In Finland the school system used to focus on British English, nowadays American English is also gaining more attention in classrooms and school books. There are of course a lot of variations inside the British and the American English as well. Although native speakers are, as one could say, the owners and the original users of a language, I do not feel that speaking should be judged on the basis of whether one sounds like a native speaker or not, as long as the speech is understandable for the majority of people. For example Luoma (2004: 10) mentions that there are a number of dialects and variations in one language,

especially in English, so how to choose which one to use as the norm for pronunciation. Luoma (2004) also mentions how many people are able to learn very clear and understandable pronunciation, without sounding at all like a native-speaker. I agree with Luoma (2004: 10) when she says that “Communicative effectiveness, which is based on comprehensibility and probably guided by native speaker standards but defined in terms of realistic learner achievement, is a better standard for learner pronunciation.”

4 STUDY QUESTIONS

With this paper I was looking for answers to the following questions:

- how do teachers feel about the assessment of speaking skills in classrooms
- how often they evaluate students’ speaking skills
- what do teachers focus on while assessing those skills (is it form, content, the overall successes of the task etc.).

5 DATA AND METHOD

In order to gather the data I conducted an Internet questionnaire which I sent to upper secondary school teachers. I sent an email asking the participants to take part in my survey in three occasions during February 2009. First, I sent the questionnaire to 60 teachers, then to 10 more and finally I sent it to another 40 teachers. I found the teachers’ email addresses in the Internet, from the upper secondary schools web pages. I found the schools web pages with the help of Google. The total number of answers I got was 32.

In my questionnaire I asked the teachers how they found assessing speaking during ordinary English lessons, what they focused on while assessing spoken language and on average, how often they assess spoken language during lessons. Some of the questions I used in my questionnaire were from a workshop by Ben Knight (1992) since he had created very good and simple criteria of assessment. I translated the questions and chose the ones that were most relevant for my study. The questionnaire consisted of multiple choice questions and open-ended questions. Of course the questionnaire had some problems, for instance the lack of explanations to the answers, and also teachers might have given their answers in a slightly polished way (they answer as they hope the situation would be), but if I were to use for

instance an interview I only would have gotten the answers and opinions of few teachers. With a questionnaire I was able to reach teachers from big and small upper secondary schools, and from various parts of the country. All the questions can be seen in Appendix 2.

For my questionnaire I chose an analytic way of assessing as a starting point. Knight (1992) gives good explanations on why to use more of an analytic way of assessing. First of all, we cannot predict every possible situation where students might use English, so judging their performance overall (in a holistic way) only tells the teachers whether a student is capable of using English in that particular situation. I would hope that English would also be used outside and after school. Secondly, for a teacher to be able to give feedback that is beneficial for the student's learning, the teacher needs to know what exactly went right and wrong in the students' performance.

I wrote the questionnaire in Finnish because of the following reasons. First of all, Finnish was the mother tongue of majority of the teachers participating in my questionnaire, so Finnish will be a fluent language to use. Secondly, talking about assessing speaking might have some special vocabulary, which could have made answering the questions difficult and possibly shorten the answers if the questions had been in English. English teachers could also feel that they are expected to use the language correctly, which again could have made answering the questions time consuming, and therefore some teachers could have chosen not to answer at all.

6 RESULTS

In this chapter I am going to present the central results of my questionnaire. I am going to start with questions relating the participants, then I am going to move on to questions relating the evaluating of oral skills and finally I am going to present the open-ended questions and answers received from them.

6.1 Participants

Total number of participants was 32, from which 29 were women and 3 men. Out of these 32 participants only 29 answered to all of the questions. There was a wide range in the years participants had worked as a teacher, from 6 years to 36 years. Most participants had worked

for 20 or 25 years (5 participants each). The average number of students per class participants reported having was 30 students (N=6). Answers ranged from 18 to 34 students per class. Only one participant answered that they had a compulsory course on speaking skills in their upper secondary school, all the other participants (28/29, Missing 3 answers) answered that they did not have a compulsory speaking course in their school.

Participants were also asked to evaluate how often they give feedback to the students in a normal English lesson. Total number of answers was 29, from which 11 said they give feedback once a week. 9 could not say how often they give feedback and 2 said they give feedback every other lesson, and 4 said they give feedback every lesson. 3 participants said they never give feedback to a student. (See Table 1).

Table 1. Teachers' own opinion on how often they give feedback to a student on oral skills during an ordinary English lesson.

		Frequenc y	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	<i>3</i>	<i>9.4</i>	<i>10.3</i>	<i>10.3</i>
	once a week	<i>11</i>	<i>34.4</i>	<i>37.9</i>	<i>48.3</i>
	cannot say	<i>9</i>	<i>28.1</i>	<i>31.0</i>	<i>79.3</i>
	every other lesson	<i>2</i>	<i>6.3</i>	<i>6.9</i>	<i>86.2</i>
	every lesson	<i>4</i>	<i>12.5</i>	<i>13.8</i>	<i>100.0</i>
	Total	<i>29</i>	<i>90.6</i>	<i>100.0</i>	
Missing	System	<i>3</i>	<i>9.4</i>		
Total		<i>32</i>	<i>100.0</i>		

Answers to the question on how participants found assessing oral skills in normal classroom were quite divided: 11/29 answered that it was problematic, 11/29 said it was possible, 2/29 said it was easy and 4/29 said it was impossible.

Participants also found teaching of oral skills quite important: 1/29 participant said it was the most important element and 28/29 said it was reasonably important. Participants also found the assessment criteria for oral skills based on syllabus quite clear (18/29). However, the majority of the participants said that their students do not probably know the criteria that well or that they know them somehow (25/29).

6.2 What do teachers focus on in students' speech

In my questionnaire I presented different sides of oral skills and asked the teachers to evaluate how often they focus on these particular points. The points were grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, conversational skills and content. I had one to three questions for each point. This division was adapted from Knight's (1992: 295-296) evaluation criteria list.

The first question was about how versatile the way a student uses grammatical structures in his/her speech is. In other words, does s/he only use simple structures or does s/he use more complex structures as well? 15/29 teachers answered that they rarely focused on this point and 9/29 answered that they often focused on it. 2/29 teachers could not tell how often they focused on the use of grammatical structures and 3/29 said they always focused on it. None of the participants answered that they never focus on this point. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. How often teachers focus on how much there is variation in the use of grammatical structures in a students' speech.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	rarely	15	46.9	51.7	51.7
	cannot say	2	6.3	6.9	58.6
	often	9	28.1	31.0	89.7
	always	3	9.4	10.3	100.0
	Total	29	90.6	100.0	
Missing	System	3	9.4		
Total		32	100.0		

The second question about grammar was about whether the students' speech is grammatically correct. In this, a slight majority of the teachers said they focused on it often or always (15/29). 10/29 teachers said they rarely focused on this point. Again, *never* got zero answers. (See Table 3.)

Table 3. How often teachers focus on whether the students' speech is grammatically correct.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	rarely	10	31.3	34.5	34.5
	cannot say	4	12.5	13.8	48.3
	often	13	40.6	44.8	93.1
	always	2	6.3	6.9	100.0
	Total	29	90.6	100.0	
Missing	System	3	9.4		
Total		32	100.0		

Next two questions were about vocabulary. The first one was about the range of vocabulary. Clear majority of participants answered that they focus on this often or always (26/29). Only three participants answered that they rarely focused on this, and there were zero who answered that they never focus on the range of vocabulary. (See Table 4.)

Table 4. How often teachers focus on the range of vocabulary

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	rarely	3	9.4	10.3	10.3
	often	19	59.4	65.5	75.9
	always	7	21.9	24.1	100.0
	Total	29	90.6	100.0	
Missing	System	3	9.4		
Total		32	100.0		

The second question about vocabulary was about the correctness of vocabulary. 16/29 participants answered that they often focus on this, 3/29 said they always focus on it and 8/29 answered that they rarely focus on this. 2/29 participants could not say how often they focus on the correctness of vocabulary.

In the questionnaire three questions were about pronunciation. These were individual sounds, stress and rhythm, and intonation. 22/29 participants said they often or always focused on individual sounds. One participant said s/he never focuses on individual sounds. Stress and rhythm seemed quite similar in answers: 21/29 participants said they often or always focus on stress and rhythm. However, 7/29 participants said they rarely focus on stress and rhythm. On intonation 20/29 participants said they often or always focus on this and 9/29 participants said they rarely focus on intonation.

Next questions focused on the fluency of the students' speech. When asked about the speed of speech 13/29 participants said they rarely focus on it. 9/29 participants said they often focus on it. 5/29 participants said they could not tell how often they focus on the speed. Hesitation while speaking was the second question about fluency. 15/29 participants said they rarely focus on students' hesitation while speaking, 7/29 answered that they often focus on it and 5/29 could not tell how often they focus on it. Hesitation before speaking was the last question about fluency and it got similar answers with the previous question. 13/29 participants answered that they rarely focus on hesitation before speaking, 3/29 said they

never focus on it, 7/29 said they often focus on it and 5/29 could not say how often they focus on it.

Conversational skills were asked next. Topic development was often the focus of 14/29 participants, where 7/29 answered that they rarely focus on it. Initiative behaviour caught the focus of teachers: 19/29 answered that they often focus on it and 7/29 answered that they always focus on it. Participants also focused on whether the students' speech was coherent: 10/29 said they often focus on it, 8/29 said they always focus on it. 7/29 answered that they rarely focus on it. Maintenance of conversation was also focused on by majority of participants: 7/29 said they always focus on it and 15/29 said they often focus on it. 2/29 answered that they rarely focus on the students' acts of maintaining the conversation and only 1 answered never to focus on this.

Content of students' speech was the focus of the last two questions asking on what and how often teachers focus on, when listening to students speech. First they were asked about the relevance of students' speech. 15/29 participants answered that they often focus on it and 5/29 answered that they always focus on it. 6/29 answered that they could not say how often they focus on the relevance of students' speech, and only 2/29 answered that they rarely focus on it. The last question was about the coherence of arguments and 11/29 answered that they often focus on it. 2/29 said they always focus on the coherence of arguments and 9/29 said they rarely focus on it. 6/29 could not say how often they focus on it.

6.3 Answers to open-ended questions

Two of the questions in the questionnaire were open-ended questions. In the first one, teachers were asked to classify the main factors that influence assessment of oral skills in normal classrooms, and in the second one they were given a free space to express their feelings relating the topic of the questionnaire.

When asked about the influencing factors the main point that came up was the group sizes, which are too big when thinking about oral assessment. 21/29 of the participants mentioned that due to large groups assessing oral skills is difficult. Other negative factors that participants mentioned were the heterogeneity of a group, time, motivation and activeness of the students, shyness of students, course content, pressure from the syllabus and seating order

of students. One participant also mentioned how in a massive school, with hundreds of new students each year, it is impossible to get to know the students and it is impossible to follow the development of a student from course to course, since one might only meet a student in one or two courses. One also has to remember that in upper secondary school the courses are relatively short. Participants also mentioned some positive factors or situations that help the assessment of oral skills. These were students reading out loud, students answering a question, constant exercise of oral skills for instance with a pair and presentations given by students.

In the free comment part of my questionnaire answers varied quite a lot, from one extreme to another. However, there were some similarities in the answers as well. Again, 12/29 mentioned that assessing oral skills in a normal classroom is difficult mainly because of time limitations and group size. 8/29 said that evaluating and exercising oral skills is a normal and just as important part of language lessons than any other part of the language. In contrast, 4/29 participants had very negative views about oral skills; for instance they said that it is extra, not salient or that it does not affect the grade student gets. Few participants also mentioned that exercising oral skills is not difficult, but assessing them is.

7 DISCUSSION

7.1 Participants

Even though the participants had a large variety in the years they had taught (from 6 to 36 years) it did not have an effect on the answers. I only had three male participants so no clear division could be seen between male or female participants. The average number of students was high, 30 students per class. Number of students was also the main cause why teachers found assessing oral skills difficult in normal classrooms and it was seen from the questionnaire that participants with lower class sizes had a more positive view on assessing oral skills. However, class sizes are probably not going to go down at least in the near future, because of the economical situation is getting worse, and it is probably going to affect schools as well.

It was interesting that when participants were asked how often they give feedback to a student about his/her oral skills, only four said they give it every lesson and only two said they give

feedback every other lesson. The most common answer was once a week (with 11/29 answers) and close to that were teachers who could not say how often they give feedback (with 9/29 answers). This would be consistent with the participants' answers about the lack of time. However, the number of participants who could not say how often they give feedback to a student would suggest that giving feedback is not consistent or even thought about that much. Maybe participants do not focus on it that much, even if 28/29 of them said teaching oral skills is reasonably important. Of course, this can be seen as a clear example of a situation where ideas and practise do not meet.

When comparing the importance teachers gave to oral skills with the importance students gave it (Mäkelä 2005), students seemed to find oral skills more important. This is not a very positive result since as mentioned above, teachers feel that oral skills are reasonably important but do not focus on them that much in practice. So the expectations students have about oral skills do not seem to meet the level of importance teachers have about oral skills.

Participants also found the assessment criteria provided by syllabus clear, even though in the Lukiokoulutuksen suullisen kielitaidon arviointiryhmän muistio (2006:11) it is said that the criteria are not clear. Maybe it is simply a matter of viewpoint: teachers do not have that much time to focus on oral skills, so that criteria that are a bit vague do not matter. Valkonen (2003) also talks about how different people use the same evaluating criteria differently. I think that vague instructions in the syllabus only increase this, and that is why teachers had quite opposite views about oral skills and their assessment in my study.

7.2 What do teachers focus on in students' speech

Based on this questionnaire teachers mostly focus on vocabulary, pronunciation, conversational skills and content. Grammar divided the group, and fluency was the aspect that was least focused on by teachers. These results would be consistent with the fact that in classroom situations students speak relatively short periods of time, or at least only a short clip from a students' speech is heard by the teacher. Therefore it seems natural that fluency is left with less attention, whereas vocabulary, pronunciation and content, all easy to assess even from a relatively short utterance, gain more focus from the teachers. These answers are also consistent with the lack of time teachers mentioned: in a classroom situation, where there are a number of things to focus on, teachers only have time to focus on easily assessable parts of

the oral skills, since there is no time for long discussions. This, however, does not give the student an extensive view of his/her oral skills, students only learn short units of language, such as the pronunciation of one word. Moreover, it is easier for students to pronounce a word perfectly when repeated right after a teacher, but when students use that same word again on their own they might pronounce it wrong. So they do not learn the rules of the language, they only learn to listen and repeat.

It was interesting to see that grammar divided the group, and two possible reasons for this seemed most logical to me. The first one could probably be move away from the “old school system” where a lot of the focus in language learning was put on grammar learning. In my questionnaire there was no clear distinction between young and old teachers, and naturally even though it is true that people are always influenced by the time they study, it would be too simplistic to assume that only age would influence ones’ teacherhood. Especially here in Finland where there are numerous possibilities to educate oneself even after graduation, and where active and interested teachers can easily exchange opinions and develop themselves and their way of teaching. Second aspect that I thought could probably influence the division participants showed, with the answers regarding whether they focus on grammar or not, could be that grammar for spoken language is different from grammar of written language. This could make the assessing quite difficult, since for instance it would require that the students would be aware of the differences, and would not confuse them with written grammar rules. This would require time and of course one needs to think what is important to teach. In this light, it would seem more reasonable to focus on written grammar rules than spoken grammar rules.

7.3 Answers to open-ended questions

It was no surprise that the most common negative factors participants mentioned were the lack of time and amount of students per classroom. However, even with many students, most teachers mentioned how it is possible to exercise speaking skills and that only the assessment is difficult. This is consistent with what Mäkelä (2005) found in his study, that there are a lot of exercises rehearsing oral skills in language text books. However, I see both positive and negative sides to rehearsing without assessment. If we are only exercising oral skills, students will probably gain more confidence in using the language, which is positive, but then again if the skills are not assessed, they could be at a very poor level. This can create problems later

on, when students assume they can speak English well, and then receive negative feedback on it at some point in their lives. This can cause bitterness towards the school system and also towards speaking English. It is vital that students are aware of how much their oral skills are evaluated and how much oral skills influence their grade. However, half of the participants mentioned that their students do not know the assessment criteria for oral skills that well. Also few participants mentioned in the open-ended section that oral skills are not at all important or that they do not affect the grade student gets.

It was interesting to see that one situation where teachers felt it was easy to assess speaking skills, was when a student is reading a text out loud or answering a question. This was similar to the answers I received from the questions on what do teachers focus on while assessing speaking skills. However, as I already mentioned before, this mainly shows pronunciation skills of the student. It was interesting to see that in the open-ended answers none of the teachers mentioned that they would like to have more possibilities to assess oral skills. Some teachers did mention the fear of more work that could come from the increased emphasis of oral skills. To me this seems like a situation where people are overworked and as a result find no interest in doing something they do not have clear instructions for.

8 CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to find out the situation concerning assessment of oral skills in upper secondary schools in Finland. Some ideas emerged from this paper and I am going to focus on these next.

First, what seemed to come up from the answers, and from the background information, was that there are no clear instructions for the assessment of oral skills. There seems to be a clear line between this and the fact that there was such a vast variation in the results I got, and that personal opinions were so visible in the answers. Some of these opinions were totally opposite to each other, which is quite interesting since our school system is often said to be based on equality and on that everybody receives the same kind of education. At least based on this paper, this is not the case among these participants' students.

I also considered what the situation will be in the future, is the current teacher training any different or will it give more tools for oral skill assessment? In the University of Jyväskylä there are two oral skill courses in all the levels of studies, and these courses are usually only worth 2 study credits. There is also no course focusing on the assessment of oral skills. The overall role of teaching assessment is not emphasized in the English department at the University of Jyväskylä, even though one of its area of focus is training future teachers of English. Of course the language used in courses is mainly English, but there are similar problems at university level as there are in upper secondary school level: the courses are full of other content so there is not that much time to focus on oral skills. However, as mentioned above in chapters 3 and 7.1 Valkonen (2003) points out how people use the same assessment criteria differently and that this could probably be solved with clear instructions and good training for the use of those criteria. So it would seem that at least yet there is no strong model for the future teachers to learn from, and if there are no big changes made in the instructions teachers receive concerning oral skills, it is very likely that the division found now in the answers, will continue.

Thirdly, one of the important questions that rose from this paper was possible problems in the Finnish classroom culture. There seems to be a conflict since it was established in previous studies (Mäkelä 2005) that students find oral skills important, but then teachers mentioned in my study that students are often quiet, shy, unmotivated or quiet down as soon as the teacher comes near them. I started to wonder could this probably be because of certain behaviour we have learnt in classrooms, where the teacher does most of the talking and that students might feel the fear of being embarrassed if they say something wrong or in a wrong way. It is quite interesting that this kind of behaviour would still be prevailing in classrooms. Of course, limiting the opportunities students get to speak makes the classroom easier to control and as the classroom sizes are growing, teachers might focus on methods that work even with strange and large groups. Moreover, if we step out of the classroom, it would be fascinating to study how the cultural heritage of Finland influences our language learning and the confidence we have, or do not have, while talking in a foreign language. It is usually said that the Finnish culture is a quiet culture, we do not have small talk tradition and we have numerous sayings when we are told that it is better to stay quiet if you do not have anything important or wise to say. Could a background like this raise the level we want to achieve in a foreign language as well: Finns only think they can speak a foreign language if they are as close to perfect in it as possible?

Overall, this paper found out that teachers felt that it is difficult to assess oral skills, and the most common reason for this was the lack of time, which again was the cause of big class sizes and tight schedule. It also seemed that the assessment they do is not consistent, and that there are a lot of personal differences between teachers, and these differences influence that classroom massively. When they did find time for assessment, teachers focused mostly on aspects of oral language that are possible to assess even from a short utterance, such as vocabulary and pronunciation.

This paper leaves a lot of room for future research, more precise questions are needed, more participants would give a more reliable outcome and also students' opinion was not asked in this study. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study what kind of an effect the new optional oral course will have to the teaching and assessment of oral skills in other courses. It would also be interesting to follow lessons, since I am sure that it would give a more overall view of the actual classroom situations.

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**Appendix 1
oral production****Common European framework for language teaching, overall**

http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

C2

Can produce clear, smoothly flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure which

helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.

C1

Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on complex subjects, integrating sub-themes,

developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.

Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting

of significant points, and relevant supporting detail.

B2

Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field

of interest, expanding and supporting ideas with subsidiary points and relevant examples.

B1

Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within

his/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points.

A2

Can give a simple description or presentation of people, living or working conditions, daily routines,

likes/dislikes, etc. as a short series of simple phrases and sentences linked into a list.

A1 Can produce simple mainly isolated phrases about people and places.

Appendix 2**The questions asked from the English teachers**

Teachers were asked to consider normal classroom situations, not lesson or courses that focus on oral skills. The real questionnaire was conducted as an Internet questionnaire and this paper only shows the questions asked, not the real form they were asked in.

1. Vastaajan sukupuoli:
 - a. Nainen
 - b. mies
2. Kuinka monta vuotta olette toimineet englanninkielenopettajana?
3. Mikä on keskimääräinen oppilasmääränne luokkaa kohden
4. Onko lukiossanne tällä hetkellä pakollista suullisen kielitaidon kurssia?
5. Oma arvionne siitä kuinka useasti annatte oppilaalle palautetta suullisesta kielitaidosta normaalilla englanninkielentunnilla?
 - a. En koskaan
 - b. Kerran viikkoon
 - c. En osaa sanoa
 - d. Joka toinen tunti
 - e. Joka tunti
6. Kuinka tärkeänä pidätte suullisen kielitaidon opetusta lukiotasolla
 - a. En lainkaan tärkeänä
 - b. En niin tärkeänä
 - c. En osaa sanoa
 - d. Kohtuullisen tärkeänä
 - e. Tärkeimpänä
7. Mihin kiinnitätte huomiota oppilaan suullisessa kielitaidossa? Vastaukset asteikolla:
en koskaan, harvoin, en osaa sanoa, usein, aina
 - a. Kuinka laajasti oppilas käyttää eri kielioppirakenteita
 - b. Onko puhe kieliopillisesti oikein
 - c. Sanaston laajuus
 - d. Sanaston virheettömyys/täsmällisyys
 - e. Yksittäiset äänteet
 - f. Painotus ja rytmi

- g. Intonaatio
 - h. Puheen nopeus
 - i. Epäröinti puhuessa
 - j. Epäröinti ennen puhumista
 - k. Aiheen kehittäminen
 - l. Oma-aloitteisuus
 - m. Puheen yhteneväisyys/eheys
 - n. Keskustelua ylläpitävät toiminnot
 - o. Merkitys/asianaakuuluvuus
 - p. Väitteiden yhteneväisyys
8. Arvioi kuinka usein oppilaanne tuottavat (vastaukset asteikolla: eivät koskaan, kerran viikossa, en osaa sanoa, joka toinen tunti, joka tunti)
- a. Puhetta lukemalla valmista tekstiä
 - b. Puhetta ilman valmista tekstiä
9. Kuinka selkeät opetussuunnitelman suullisen kielitaidon arviointikriteerit mielestänne ovat? Vastaukset asteikolla: eivät lainkaan selkeät, melko epäselvät, en osaa sanoa, melko selkeät, erittäin selkeät
10. Miltä suullisen kielitaidon arviointi teistä tuntuu normaalissa luokkatilanteessa? Vastaukset asteikolla: mahdottomalta, ongelmalliselta, en osaa sanoa, mahdolliselta, helpolta
11. Kuinka monipuolisesti käyttämänne kirjasarja tarjoaa suullista kielitaitoa harjoittavia tehtäviä? Eli mahdollistavatko tehtävät suullisen kielitaidon arvioinnin sen eri osa-alueilta? Vastaukset asteikolla: ei lainkaan, heikosti, en osaa sanoa, hyvin, erittäin hyvin
12. Mitä kirjasarjaa koulussanne käytetään tällä hetkellä?
13. Mitkä tekijät mielestänne vaikuttavat eniten suullisen kielitaidon arviointiin tavallisessa luokkatilanteessa? (ei suulliseen kielitaitoon painottuvilla kursseilla/tunneilla)
14. Omia mielipiteitänne englannin kielen suullisen kielitaidon arvioinnista lukiotasolla, normaaleilla englanninkielentunneilla?