

“Speaking inevitably plays a smaller role than
it should”:
Teaching of oral skills in a Finnish upper
secondary school EFL classroom

Bachelor's thesis
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| <p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Suullisen kielitaidon arvioinnista vieraiden kielten ylioppilaskokeissa on keskusteltu pitkään, ja suullinen osio on suunnitelmissa sisällyttää niihin lähivuosina. On siis ajankohtaista tutkia, miten suullista kielitaitoa tällä hetkellä opetetaan lukiossa.</p> <p>Tämän tapaustutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää, millä tavoin suullista kielitaitoa opetetaan Englannin lukiokursseilla ja mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat siihen, minkä verran ja millaisten tehtävien avulla suullista kielitaitoa opetetaan. Suullisten tehtävien tyyppien luokittelun pohjana oli Mäkelän (2005) tutkimuksessa käytetty malli kolmesta kommunikatiivisten tehtävien ulottuvuudesta: avoimuudesta, autenttisuudesta sekä vuorovaikutuksellisuudesta. Tutkimus toteutettiin havainnoimalla viittä erään itäsuomalaisen lukion englannin oppituntia sekä haastatteleamalla opettajaa, joka piti tunnit.</p> <p>Observoinneissa havaittiin, että suullisia tehtäviä tehtiin tunneilla vähän. Ne tehtävät, jotka tehtiin, eivät pääasiassa olleet kommunikatiivisia. Tunneilla ja haastattelussa selvisi kuitenkin, että havainnoituilla kursseilla tehdään suullisia tehtäviä äänitettävien kotitehtävien muodossa. Nämä koearvosanaan vaikuttavat tehtävät osoittivat kommunikatiivisuuden piirteitä. Haastattelun avulla saatiin selville, että syynä tunnilla tehtyjen suullisten tehtävien vähyyteen oli opetusryhmien suuret koot, huonosti suulliseen työskentelyyn soveltuvat tilat sekä oppilaiden varautuneisuus oppitunnilla ääneen puhumista kohtaan. Tutkimuksen tulokset antavat viitteitä siitä, että suullisen kielitaidon opetusta lukion vieraiden kielten oppitunneilla tulee kehittää, jotta opetussuunnitelmaan kirjattu kommunikatiivisuuden tavoite toteutuu ja opiskelijat ovat tulevaisuudessa valmiita suulliseen ylioppilaskokeeseen.</p> | |
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1 INTRODUCTION

The teaching of oral skills in foreign languages in Finnish upper secondary schools has been a topic of wide interest in recent years. There are plans to include an oral production section in the matriculation examination of foreign languages within the next few years (The Finnish Matriculation Examination Board 2017: 9), which makes this discussion highly topical at the moment. Since the matriculation examination has a significant impact on what is taught in upper secondary schools, and oral skills are not yet assessed in it, however, they may be given less focus in teaching (Tergujeff 2013: 103). Students also report that they would like to receive more instruction in oral language skills (Mäkelä 2005: 146; Vaarala 2013: 108). In general, oral skills are a very significant part of language competence needed in working life in the globalised world (Palmer 2014: 5). It is thus of interest to explore how they are incorporated in upper secondary school English teaching.

Several studies have been conducted recently on teachers' and students' views on the teaching of oral language skills in English in Finnish upper secondary schools (see Kaski-Akhawan 2013; Vaarala 2013). These studies suggest that oral skills are considered to be an important aspect of language competence by both students and teachers. Previous research has also examined what kinds of oral tasks are included in upper secondary school EFL textbooks (see for example Hietala 2013). However, little research has focused on what actually goes on in the classroom in regard to oral skills. For this reason, in this case study, I am going to focus on oral tasks in English lessons in upper secondary school by conducting classroom observation as well as a teacher interview.

The general objective of the study is to examine the role of oral tasks within five upper secondary school English classes. The oral tasks done in the classes will be analysed in terms of their communicativeness, as this is an aspect which is currently emphasised in foreign language teaching (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2001: 27). By conducting an interview with the teacher who taught the observed lessons, his views on oral skills teaching will be examined. The

teacher's views will then be compared with the observations made during the lessons in order to examine how those views are reflected in the teaching.

First, general information about the teaching of oral skills in Finnish upper secondary school language classes will be presented. The aim and research questions as well as the methodology used in the present study will then be introduced. In Chapter 4, the data will be analysed and discussed. Finally, in Chapter 5, the main findings will be summed up, the study will be evaluated critically, and possible topics for future research will be discussed.

2 TEACHING OF ORAL SKILLS

In this chapter, the theoretical background of the study will be introduced. This includes justification for the importance of teaching oral skills, ways to define and classify different oral task types as well as information about the teaching of oral skills in foreign languages in Finnish upper secondary schools.

2.1 Importance of oral language skills

Oral language skills are a fundamental part of our overall language competence. Out of all their skills in a foreign language, oral skills are usually the ones that learners need the most in their everyday lives (Takala 1993: 4). The main objectives of the Finnish National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Schools (*Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet* 2015: 110), hereafter referred to as the National Core Curriculum, emphasise the importance of communication skills in today's globalised world and working life in particular. As Palmer (2014: 5) states, three-fourths of all communication time in the workplace is devoted to listening and speaking, whereas one fourth is devoted to reading and writing, which supports the idea of oral skills being the most crucial regarding the learners' futures. Teachers and students also seem to agree on the important role of oral skills in language teaching (Takala 1993; Kaski-Akhawan 2013).

Listening skills are closely related to speaking skills and can thus be argued to fit under the umbrella term of 'oral skills'. However, since listening tasks have been included in the matriculation examination since 1974 according to The Finnish Matriculation Examination Board, the focus of the present study will be on oral production tasks.

2.2 Defining and classifying oral tasks

In this section, different definitions for the terms 'task' and 'oral task' will be discussed, as well as different ways to classify them into categories.

2.2.1 What are oral tasks?

Before delving deeper into the ways oral tasks can be classified, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term 'oral task'. Commonly, the term 'oral task' is used to refer to an activity which involves oral production, speaking in some form (Alaniva 1984: 49). The term 'task' requires further inspection, however: in general, tasks are "real-world activities" (Long 2015: 6). In a school context, this relates to the authenticity of the task, which is one of the defining factors that separate it from 'exercises' or 'drills': the language behaviour elicited by the task "corresponds to the kind of communicative behaviour that arises from performing real-world tasks" (Ellis 2003: 6). Other characteristics of tasks include a primary focus on meaning as well as the engaging of cognitive processes (Ellis 2003: 9-10). According to these criteria, therefore, a read-aloud activity would be classified as an oral exercise, whereas a conversation activity about a topic that relates to the learners' lives would be considered an oral task.

Tasks can also be divided into authentic and pedagogic tasks. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001: 157), hereafter referred to as CEFR, characteristic of the former is that they are chosen based on the learners' needs outside of the classroom. An example of this kind of task could be preparing and giving a public presentation. Pedagogic tasks, on the other hand, are only indirectly related to real-life tasks, but they still "actively involve learners in a meaningful communication" (CEFR 2001: 158). They can involve metacommunication, for example practicing the language items that are needed in carrying out a particular task. Both 'authentic' and 'pedagogic' tasks, however, are essentially communicative if they require the learners to use linguistic resources to achieve a certain communicative goal.

2.2.2 Classifications of oral task types

Oral tasks, whether authentic or pedagogic, can also be categorised further. In his study which examines textbooks, students' and teachers' views and classroom

practices with regard to oral skills in Finnish upper secondary school, Mäkelä (2005) classifies oral tasks according to their authenticity, interactivity and openness. These categories are related to the current communicative language learning practice. The characteristics of the first category were already discussed in the previous section: authentic tasks involve meaningful conversation and the communication of relevant messages (Mäkelä 2005: 31).

Interactivity, on the other hand, involves the speakers' motivation to communicate with each other, and the motivation arises from the goal of closing an information gap. There are three types of information gaps: factual information gap, opinion gap and reasoning gap (Prabhu 1987, cited in Mäkelä 2005: 27). These types of tasks can involve different games and role plays, for example. Problem solving tasks are also a good example of highly interactive tasks.

The third category, openness, describes how restricted the communication task is. It can be described in terms of four different levels (Grever et al. 1981: 63-229, cited in Mäkelä 2005: 19):

1. totally closed production
2. totally guided production
3. production guided with clues
4. free production

Out of these four, the first two levels can be considered to be pre-communicative exercises: they are rather mechanical and lack genuine communicativeness. Levels three and four, however, manage to create genuine communication, and these often involve closing the information gap discussed above. These categories are not strictly defined, however, and some tasks or exercises can be seen to fit several of them. Nonetheless, they can be used to define in more detail what is actually meant by communicativeness in oral tasks.

2.3 Teaching of oral skills in Finnish upper secondary school

In this section, the teaching of oral skills in foreign languages in Finnish upper secondary schools are discussed from three different perspectives: aims, teachers' and students' views as well as the matriculation examination.

2.3.1 Aims in teaching of oral skills in foreign languages

In the Finnish upper secondary school system, the contents of teaching are based on local curricula, which are designed in accordance with the National Core Curriculum. The language skill levels described in CEFR are the basis for the aims of language teaching in the National Core Curriculum (*Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet* 2015: 108). In the curriculum, the overall goals of foreign language teaching are defined to support the learners' communicative competence in the given language. Communicative competence can be defined as the ability to communicate in a meaningful way in different situations (Alaniva 1984: 30). Particularly with regard to the English language, the National Core Curriculum (*Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet* 2015: 109) emphasises the role of English as an important tool for intercultural communication: the ability to communicate in a wide variety of local, national and global communities is brought to the forefront.

CEFR (2001) also emphasises communicative competence in its goals: it defines the goals in spoken interaction and spoken production, the first being specifically about communicative competence. The interactional goals include the ability to communicate fluently and spontaneously, adapting to different communicational contexts (CEFR 2001: 27). CEFR seems to place less emphasis on the role of English as a *Lingua Franca*, though, and it focuses mostly on defining successful spoken interaction with native speakers of English.

Both the National Core Curriculum and the Common European Framework highlight conveying the spoken message in an intelligible manner and taking into account the situational and wider context of the interaction. Communicative competence can thus be seen as the guiding principle in both.

2.3.2 Teachers' and students' views on the teaching of oral skills

Mäkelä's study (2005: 163) on teachers' and students' views on practicing oral skills in Finnish upper secondary school English classes showed that even though teachers reported that oral skills are practiced often in their classes, their students did not consider the amount of oral practice sufficient. Students also did not find the oral exercises as interesting and meaningful as the teachers did (Mäkelä 2005: 146). Similar results have been found more recently by Vaarala (2013: 110).

In a survey conducted by Huuskonen (2006), upper secondary school language teachers' opinions on the teaching of oral skills were explored. The results show that teachers have a positive attitude towards the teaching of oral skills, but there are several issues that can have a negative impact on the actual opportunities to practice oral skills in class. These issues include lack of time and the impracticalities caused by large teaching groups, among other things.

In another survey conducted by Kaski-Akhawan (2013), the attitudes of both students and teachers towards the teaching of oral skills in upper secondary school were studied. According to the responses, the teachers and students agreed that they found the status of oral skills appropriate and that they are emphasised enough. The teachers, however, felt that the students' motivation to practice oral skills is reduced by the fact that oral skills are not assessed in the matriculation examination (Kaski-Akhawan 2013: 46).

2.3.3 Effects of the matriculation exam on the contents of teaching

In Finland, upper secondary school students participate in a national matriculation examination at the end of their studies. This examination is crucial because of its great impact on students' opportunities to enter higher education, and the significance of the matriculation examination in this regard is on the rise (Thynell 2017). As a result of this, preparing the students for the matriculation exam has an important effect on the contents of teaching in upper secondary school. The matriculation examination currently tests reading and writing skills as well as listening comprehension, but not

oral competence. The so called washback effect of this is seen as a significant factor why the teaching of oral skills is considered lacking in upper secondary school even though oral skills themselves are considered an important part of overall language competence (Takala 1993: 4; Mäkelä 2005: 164; Huuskonen 2006: 82; Kaski-Akhawan 2013: 46).

For decades, there have been discussions of including a section specifically assessing students' oral proficiency in the matriculation exam. Takala (1993: 30) presented a preliminary model of what an oral section in the matriculation exam could look like and how it would be assessed in the early 1990's. Some potential issues regarding the oral production part that he highlights are the difficulty of assuring the reliability of the testing of oral skills and the practicalities of arranging the oral test efficiently.

Since the 1990's, the plans to include an oral section in the matriculation examination have come a long way. Current technology is able to resolve some of the issues raised by Takala, though some challenges still remain: the recently implemented electronic exams facilitate the inclusion of an oral production section, but for example voice recognition software needed for efficient assessment of the test is still under development. According to the Finnish Matriculation Examination Board (2017: 9), the current plan is to include the oral section in the matriculation examinations of languages in 2022 at the earliest.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

In this chapter, the aim and the research questions as well as the data and methods of analysis will be introduced. Justifications for choosing these particular methods will also be presented.

3.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of my study is to explore what types of oral tasks are used in the EFL classroom in a Finnish upper secondary school, what the teacher's views on teaching oral skills are and how these views are reflected in the teaching. The oral task types will be classified into categories, and they will be analysed in terms of communicativeness, which is one of the main aspects considered in language teaching according to the National Core Curriculum. In order to explore these topics, my study will focus on the following research questions:

1. What types of oral tasks are used during English lessons in a Finnish upper secondary school?
2. How do these oral tasks relate to the three main aspects emphasised in communicative language teaching: authenticity, interactivity and openness?
3. What factors affect what kinds of oral tasks are done in upper secondary school EFL classes?

3.2 Data

The data collection methods used for the study were classroom observation and interviewing the teacher. The data were collected at an upper secondary school in Eastern Finland. During five English classes, which lasted 75 minutes each, observations on the teaching of oral skills were made, more specifically on what kinds of oral tasks and exercises were done. A preliminary classification of task types was done already during the observations by marking the tasks down in their respective categories in a pre-prepared observation sheet. The sheet was modelled after the observation grid used by Mäkelä (2005: 214). Notes on other aspects of the lesson were

also taken on a blank sheet of paper, such as how actively the students seemed to be engaged in completing the tasks and what kinds of instructions they were given. The observer also had access to the textbooks used in the observed classes. During the observations, the teacher did not know what exact aspects of the classes were being observed because being aware of them might have had an influence on the contents of teaching. The first observation was intended as a pilot, but since no major modifications were made to the observation scheme based on the pilot observation, the data from this initial observation was treated as comparable with the other observations and thus included in the study. From this point onwards, the classes will be referred to as follows: class 1 (C1), class 2 (C2) etc. Table 1 shows further information on the observed classes.

Table 1: Information on the upper secondary school classes that were observed.

| | Class 1 | Class 2 | Class 3 | Class 4 | Class 5 |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Course | ENA6 | ENA6 | ENA6 | ENA6 | ENA3 |
| Level | second-year | second-year | second-year | second-year | first-year |
| Number of students | 21 | 27 | 29 | 27 | 28 |
| Textbook used | <i>On Track 6</i> | <i>On Track 6</i> | <i>On Track 6</i> | <i>On Track 6</i> | <i>On Track 3</i> |
| Duration | 75 min | 75 min | 75 min | 75 min | 75 min |

When it comes to the use of classroom observation, or any other type of observation, as a data collection method, it is important to take into account the potential effect the presence of the observer may have on the situation that is being observed (Mackey 2015: 240). In the present study, the impact of the observer was minimised by not informing the teacher or student groups on which specific aspects of the classes were being observed and what the exact objective of the study was before the observations.

After all the five observations were completed, a semi-structured interview with the teacher who gave the lessons was conducted. He was asked about his views on the teaching of oral skills in upper secondary school English classes in general, and his own classes in particular. During the interview, the teacher was informed of the exact objective of the study for the first time. The recording of this 20-minute interview forms the second part of the data, the first part being the notes from the observations. The interview was conducted in Finnish, and the extracts from the interview cited in this study were translated into English by me.

I chose to use classroom observation as a data collection method because it offers a new perspective on the topic that has previously mainly been studied using interviews, questionnaires and textbook analyses. Classroom observation as a method is “fundamentally different from questioning because it provides direct information rather than self-report accounts” (Dörnyei 2007: 178). It can thus provide a more objective view of how oral skills teaching is actualised during lessons, although one must bear in mind that the observations are still the observer’s interpretations of the situation and cannot therefore be completely objective. The interview, on the other hand, was intended to give insight into the teacher’s reasons behind choosing these specific oral tasks and his attitudes towards the teaching of oral skills in general. By using a combination of these two different data collection methods, a more comprehensive picture of the teaching of oral skills in the classes could be obtained.

3.3 Methods of analysis

The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis as well as some quantitative analysis regarding the amount of oral tasks. By using this method, the different types of oral tasks that were being used in the lessons were counted and classified into categories with regard to authenticity, interactivity and openness as presented in Mäkelä’s study (2005). Because of the low number of tasks that were done during the classes, other aspects of the classes that were noted in the observations and which had relevance to the teaching of oral skills, such as the teacher’s comments about the matriculation examination, were also analysed in more detail. These comments were

counted and their significance related to the attitudes the teacher had towards the teaching of oral skills was examined.

Qualitative content analysis also made it possible to find patterns in the interview responses which were compared with the findings from the classroom observation. This way, the teacher's perception of the role of oral skills in his teaching could be compared with the actual amount and quality of oral tasks in his lessons. The findings from both the observations and the interview were also compared with findings from previous research.

4 OBSERVATIONS AND TEACHER'S VIEWS ON ORAL SKILLS TEACHING

4.1 General observations

For the purposes of the present study, an explicitly oral task is understood as an activity in which the students speak aloud in the target language with a specific instruction. Thus, any activity that fits into this criteria was classified as an oral task. Here, it is also important to consider the teacher's own criteria for an oral task which he gave during the interview, which is "something in which you have to produce something [spoken]". This is in line with the definition chosen for the study.

In total, the number of explicitly oral tasks during the classes was low. Table 2 shows the amounts of all tasks and oral tasks done during the classes as well as the proportion of oral tasks compared to all tasks. In a strict sense, only four explicitly oral tasks were done during the five lessons observed. However, other instances of oral communication between the teacher and the students in the target language could also be seen, usually in the form of the teacher asking questions about the cultural topic of the lesson and how it relates to the students' own lives. These instances do not fit the stricter criteria of a task as they are less structured and more spontaneous, but nonetheless they can offer valuable opportunities for a communicative use of oral skills during the lessons.

Table 2: The amount of oral tasks and their proportion of all tasks done during the classes.

| | Class 1 | Class 2 | Class 3 | Class 4 | Class 5 | All classes |
|-----------------------|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------------|
| All tasks | 10 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 44 |
| Explicitly oral tasks | 1 (10 %) | 1 (8%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (29%) | 4 (9%) |

As can be seen in Table 2, oral tasks were slightly more frequent in C5, which was the only first-year class of all five. This suggests that at the beginning of upper secondary school English studies, oral competence is emphasised more. Similar effect has come up previously in Vaarala's (2013: 98) study in which one of the teachers who was interviewed stated that the closer the matriculation exams get, the less oral skills are practiced. This is also supported by a comment that the teacher made to the observer during a lunch break in the middle of C3 in which he stated that for many students, the second-year course (ENA6) can be the last English course before taking the matriculation examination the following year, unless they choose to take optional English courses. For this reason, the teacher wanted to put a particularly strong emphasis on practising the skills that are tested in the matriculation examination, which do not include oral skills, in classes 1-4.

However, it should also be taken into account that in the interview, the teacher revealed that classes 1-4 were not exactly typical with regard to the amount of oral tasks done in class. The reasons given for this were that a significant amount of students from the group had been absent from some previous classes, which meant that the teacher needed to cover certain topics that they had missed but not linger on them as the other students in the group had already worked on them. Therefore only the most essential tasks were completed, which resulted in there being less oral tasks than normally. This suggests, however, that oral tasks were not considered essential and were ranked lower in priority than other types of tasks.

It was also noted during the observations that student engagement in the oral tasks done in class was low. Even though it was not possible for the observer to determine the exact numbers of how many students participated, an impressionistic observation concluded that approximately from one third to half of the students were engaged in completing an oral task when one was introduced by the teacher. This observation is also supported by the teacher's own observations which will be discussed in section 4.6.1. It was also notable that the teaching groups were quite large, from 21 to 29 students, which is also something the teacher brought up in the interview and which will also be examined further in section 4.6.1.

All of the explicitly oral tasks done during the classes were taken from the course textbooks, *On Track 3* and *On Track 6*. The other instances of oral production which were observed were less structured, created spontaneously by the teacher. Even though the explicit oral tasks that were done were from the textbook, there were also oral tasks in the books related to the topic that was being dealt with which were not done in class. An example of this could be seen in C1 when the teacher chose to include written exercises 3A, 3B and 3C from *On Track 6* (Daffue-Karsten et al. 2017: 42-45) but leave out 3D (Daffue-Karsten et al. 2017: 45) which would have been an oral task. In this instance, the oral task would seemingly have fit particularly well with the topic, which was different registers of speech, and in task 3A the different registers of spoken language in particular were being examined. This is only a singular instance, though, so many conclusions cannot be drawn from it, but it does suggest a prioritisation of other types of tasks over oral ones in a situation where the material needed to be covered in a swift manner in order to stay on schedule.

4.2 Explicitly oral tasks done during the classes

As previously concluded, four explicitly oral tasks were done during the five observed classes. More detailed descriptions of them can be seen in Table 3. Three of the four explicit oral tasks turned out to be somewhat mechanical, thus fitting in the category of totally closed or totally guided production according to the classification of Grewer et al. (1981: 63-229, cited in Mäkelä 2005: 19). With regard to authenticity, these three tasks can be categorised as non-authentic as they do not include meaningful conversation in the sense that the messages that are being conveyed are predetermined by the textbook. For the same reason, these three tasks lack the information gap based on which they could be classified as interactive. Two of them are, however, related to practising the interactive aspects of language.

Table 3: Explicit oral tasks

| | Task 1 | Task 2 | Task 3 | Task 4 |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Done in | Class 1 | Class 2 | Class 5 | Class 5 |
| Approx. duration | 5 min | 8 min | 5 min | 3 min |
| Instruction (TB = textbook instruction, T = spoken instruction given by the teacher) | TB: <i>In pairs, answer the following questions to find out whether studying abroad would be right for you.</i> | TB: Tic-tac-toe: <i>The aim of the game is to get a row of Xs or Os -- by translating the sentences correctly.</i> | TB: <i>Work in pairs. Take turns reading the word pairs out loud. Underline the syllable which is stressed.</i> | T: <i>Read sentences aloud, pay attention to word stress.</i> |
| Source | <i>On Track 6 (Daffue-Karsten et al. 2016: 56)</i> | <i>On Track 6 (Daffue-Karsten et al. 2016: 218)</i> | <i>On Track 3 (Daffue-Karsten et al. 2016: 149)</i> | <i>On Track 3 (Daffue-Karsten et al. 2017: 150)</i> |
| Form of working | Pair work | Pair work | Pair work | Pair work |

An example of totally guided production exercise can be seen in the direct translation task 2, a game of tic-tac-toe in which the students had to take turns in translating sentences from Finnish into English in order to proceed in the game. The goal of the exercise is to practise forming expressions containing indefinite pronouns correctly. The focus of the task is on grammar rather than on the communicative aspect. As the task involves direct translation and offers no room for communication born out of authentic necessity to express an idea, it can be categorised as totally closed production. The main focus of the exercise is in practising accuracy and raising the students' awareness of the differences between the uses of indefinite pronouns in Finnish and in English instead of practising oral production.

The two word stress tasks, 3 and 4, can also be categorised as totally closed production. The objective in these two tasks is to read word pairs or sentences aloud to a partner paying particular attention to pronunciation and word stress. The teacher explained

to the students in class that one of the main goals of the exercises was to raise the students' awareness of the differences between the prosodies of the Finnish and English languages. The teacher also presented a model of the kind of pronunciation which was to be avoided in which he exaggerated the transfer influence of Finnish in his pronunciation and which he called "rally English":

"--that's why it sounds so bad" [tæts vai it saunds sou pæd]

By doing this, the teacher treated the topic of pronunciation, which can be a source of insecurity for many students (see section 4.6.1), with humour and in this way encouraged the students to express themselves freely: perhaps the exaggeratedly erroneous pronunciation model was intended to give the students more confidence in their own oral production abilities.

Unlike the direct translation exercise, the word stress exercises involve an explicit focus on oral skills in particular. Even though they are not communicative in the sense that they involve predetermined messages instead of ones that arise from meaningful communication between the speakers, it still has relevance with regard to oral communication as pronunciation and prosody are significant aspects affecting the intelligibility of spoken language. In this sense, they include elements of interactivity even though the tasks themselves would not be categorised as interactive according to the model used by Mäkelä (2005: 27). It was also notable that the textbook instruction for task 4 only included listening to the pre-recorded model and marking the word stress, but the teacher added an oral production aspect to the task by asking the students to read the sentences aloud paying particular attention to word stress. This can thus be seen as an example of the teacher encouraging oral production in class.

Task 1, which was done in C1, differs from the other three in that it can be classified as interactive and as 'production guided with clues' with regard to openness. In this task, the students answered questions related to studying abroad in pairs. The questions also include ones that encourage the students to elaborate on their answers, for example by asking them to give reasons for their opinions. Task 1 involves

significantly more free production than the other three. Its authenticity can be questioned as it still does not rise from the students' own interests and is dictated by the textbook, but it does have elements of authenticity as it encourages the students to speak about their own wishes and opinions. There is a genuine information gap in the sense that the student does not know what the other student is going to say. It is also possible for this exercise to include an opinion gap in case the students involved in the discussion develop it further by comparing their opinions on the topics and trying to understand each other's point of view in case they disagree. Unlike the three pre-communicative tasks discussed above, this one manages to create genuine communication.

In sum, the four explicitly oral tasks done during the classes were mostly non-communicative in the sense that they involved totally closed or totally guided production and were not highly authentic or interactive, with the exception of Task 1. Even though authentic and interactive tasks have been found to be more motivating for students (Kaski-Akhawan 2013: 40), it is possible that the teacher considers the more closed tasks to be easier for the students who he knows to be hesitant to speak aloud in class.

4.3 Other instances of oral production

In addition to the four explicit oral tasks, there were some other types of oral production observed during the classes. These involve instances of oral communication between an individual student and the teacher, but not really between students. These instances included the teacher asking the students a question, and they got a turn to reply by raising their hand. In this way, the teacher encouraged oral production in the classes, even though this method of doing that only engaged one student at a time.

Some of the questions posed by the teacher were related to the cultural aspects being taught in the lessons, such as the distinction between different types of professions. For example in C4, the teacher asked the class if they knew what the term 'blue-collar

worker' meant. According to Mäkelä's (2005) classification established earlier, these kinds of questions related to teaching cultural content would not be considered authentic or interactive as the teacher already knows the answer to the question and thus there is no actual information gap to be filled. Another type of teacher question directed at the students in C4 involved both communicativeness and authenticity, however. In this instance, the teacher asked a genuine question related to the students' lives in which he inquired how many of them were working part-time. He also recounted his own experiences related to the subject. This interaction can be classified as communicative and authentic as it is a genuine question to which the teacher does not know the answer, but it does not involve many students, and a similar problem with the lacking student participation as with the other oral activities could be observed. The students also initiated some communication with the teacher by asking questions. However, the questions were nearly always in Finnish, and while the teacher evidently tried to encourage oral communication in the target language by responding in English, it was usually to no avail.

From these observed instances, it can be deduced that the teacher was willing to encourage spontaneous and authentic oral communication in the classes, but most of the students did not respond to these attempts. A potential reason for this could be the students' uncertainty of their own skills: responding to the teacher in English while the rest of the group is listening may seem daunting for them.

4.4 Oral tasks done outside of the observed classes

It is worth noting that even though the amount of oral exercises during the classes was low, oral production was included in the grading of the courses. This demonstrates that the lack of oral tasks during the classes was likely not due to the teacher not considering oral skills important. As a part of the final exam for course 6, there was going to be a video CV that the students were to record at home. While giving the students instructions for this task in C4, the teacher emphasised that in addition to content, the students' way of expressing themselves in English was going to be evaluated. This task involves more authenticity than any of the exercises done in class,

as it is based on the students' needs outside the context of school: they get to talk about their real experiences and qualities as well as getting to practise a skill which they will surely need later in their lives. This task therefore fits in with the definition of authentic task presented in CEFR (2001: 157).

In the final exam of course 3, the oral section, which was also to be recorded at home and sent to the teacher, included a pronunciation exercise related to word stress from the textbook as well as a presentation of the students' likes and dislikes about culture. In the instructions given for the second part of this exercise in C5, the teacher pointed out that it should be spontaneous and not read out from paper. The first one of these exercises is the same one as Task 4 in C5, thus, a closed production read-aloud exercise. The second one, however, is more authentic: it directly involves the student's personal interests, and there is a real information gap as the teacher gets to know about the students' interests in addition to being able to evaluate their language skills. When it comes to openness, the task is free production, and the teacher even emphasised this by encouraging the students not to read out from paper, seeing as if they did that the oral task would turn into totally closed production in the moment of speaking even if the text was produced by the students themselves.

The fact that these more open and authentic tasks were included in the courses even if they were not incorporated in the classes shows that the teacher acknowledges their importance. Doing these types of tasks at home may make oral production easier for the students who do not feel comfortable speaking aloud in class.

4.5 Emphasis on the matriculation examination

It became notable during the observations that the teacher placed a strong, explicit emphasis on the upcoming matriculation examination. In classes C1-C4, it was brought up by the teacher several times. The number of mentions of the matriculation examination made by the teacher during the observed classes are shown in Table 4. These instances included comments about whether the exercises done in class resembled those typically encountered in the matriculation examinations and tips on

how to succeed in the exam: “The matriculation exam is all about vocabulary, so if you want the top grades, this [formal vocabulary] is your thing -- This [an exercise in the textbook] is a bit too simple compared to the real stuff [exercises in the matriculation exam]”.

Table 4: Mentions of the matriculation examination made by the teacher during classes

| | Class 1 | Class 2 | Class 3 | Class 4 | Class 5 |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| Level | second-year | second-year | second-year | second-year | first-year |
| Number of mentions of matriculation exam by teacher | 3 | 4 | 6 | 2 | 0 |

It is also worth noting that C3, which did not include any oral exercises, was the class which included the highest number of comments regarding the matriculation exam made by the teacher, as can be seen in Table 4. During this same class, the teacher also directly addressed the lack of focus on oral skills in the examination: he stated that even though speaking skills are not directly tested, there can be tasks which simulate those skills, such as writing a speech or choosing a fitting response to a conversation heard in a listening task. The other class that did not have any oral exercises, C4, included a lengthy explanation of the oral task that was going to be a part of the final exam of the course. It can therefore be observed that even though any oral tasks were not done in these two classes, oral competence was not completely ignored in them.

The class which included the most oral tasks (C5) was also the one where no comments regarding the matriculation examination were made, and as previously discussed, the reason for this might be that C5 was a first-year class. These observations support the idea that the closer the students get to the matriculation exam, the less they receive teaching in oral skills. This demonstrates that the matriculation examination has a significant role in determining the contents of teaching, which has also been noted in previous research (see for example Mäkelä 2005: 164; Huuskonen 2006: 82; Kaski-Akhawan 2013: 46).

It is possible that upper secondary school students' motivation towards studying English speaking skills can be weakened by the fact that oral skills are not being tested in the matriculation exam. The question can be raised whether the teacher's attitude towards the matriculation examination and oral skills can also affect students' motivation. The teacher observed in the present study did encourage oral communication in the classes by creating opportunities for authentic discussion and adding an oral aspect to an exercise. On the other hand, because of the low number of oral tasks, the students might get an impression of them being less important.

4.6 Teacher's views on oral skills teaching

After the observations of the five classes were completed, the teacher who taught these lessons was interviewed on his opinions on the importance of teaching oral skills in general as well as his views on how oral skills are incorporated in his teaching. The goal was to be able to compare the teacher's views with the observations of how oral skills were treated in the classes. The interview was also intended to give insight into the reasons why oral skills were taught the way they were.

4.6.1 Teacher's general views on teaching oral skills and his own teaching

In general, the teacher considered oral skills in language teaching important. When asked about his views on the importance of teaching oral skills in upper secondary school, the teacher stated as follows:

(1) "Tietysti se on tärkeää, mutta kun sitä ei tällä hetkellä testata [ylioppilaskokeessa] niin se on se mistä on helppointa myös tinkiä."

("Of course it is important, but since it is not being tested [in the matriculation examination] at the moment, it is also what is the easiest to sacrifice.")

The teacher also said that in many situations in which using English is necessary that students are likely to encounter in their lives, it is likely that spoken language skills in particular are needed. It is thus clear that the teacher values oral skills but at the same time is keenly aware of the fact that oral tasks are more easily left out than other types

of tasks. It is interesting to note that the influence of the matriculation exam was brought up by the teacher immediately when the topic of teaching oral skills came up, suggesting that it is the single most important factor affecting the teaching of oral skills in his opinion.

The teacher also brought up the scarcity of oral exercises in his own teaching without being specifically prompted to emphasise that and without yet knowing that that was the focus of the interview and the observations. When asked how the four aspects of language – reading, speaking, listening and writing – are divided in his classes, he stated:

(2) "Suhde ei varmasti ole se mitä sen pitäisi olla. Puhuminen väistämättä näissä isoissa ryhmissä jää pienempään osaan kuin mitä sen pitäisi olla."

("The ratio is definitely not what it should be. Speaking, in these big groups, inevitably plays a smaller role than it should.")

The issue of large group sizes, which the teacher brought up and which can have a negative impact on the opportunities to teach oral skills, has also been noted in previous research, such as in Huuskonen (2006). The teacher also presented some other reasons for this lack of oral skills teaching in addition to the large size of teaching groups, such as the lack of a language laboratory in which it would be more convenient to practice oral skills. Another reason presented by the teacher is the students' hesitance to speak aloud in class where other students can hear them. This is also related to the previous point about the language laboratory, as in them students would have more privacy for practicing oral skills. The teacher stated the following about the low student engagement in oral tasks:

(3) "Sen mä oon huomannu että semmosissa kun ryhdytään harjoittelemaan ääntämistä niin se kyllä hajoaa sinne, että jokainen tekee jotain muuta kuin sitä ääntämistehtävää mitä pitäisi harjotella, että kuitenkin ääntämistä ei voi oppia teoriassa, se on ihan tehtävä käytännössä."

("I have noticed that when we start practising pronunciation it does fall apart, so that everyone is doing something other than the pronunciation task they should be practising, however you cannot learn pronunciation in theory, you must actually do it in practice.")

The lack of student engagement in oral tasks was also observed during the classes. The teacher says the reason for this might be that the students often do not feel confident in their ability to speak English and are thus unwilling to do it in class where other students can hear them. As a solution to the student's reluctance to speak in class, the teacher has started to include an oral section in the final exams of his courses. This way, the oral production tasks can be completed at home and sent digitally to the teacher, which enables the students to complete the oral tasks in the privacy of their own home, without fear of judgement from other students. It can be contemplated, however, whether the students would become more active participants in the oral tasks completed in the classroom as well if the tasks were more authentic and open, as these types of tasks have been shown to be more motivating for students in general (Kaski-Akhawan 2013: 40).

4.6.2 Teacher's views on oral task types

When asked what types of oral tasks the teacher tends to include in his classes, he said he strives to include both "mechanical" pronunciation and read-aloud exercises as well as more free production. The free production tasks are typically related to the main topics of the courses, such as culture, which was the topic of the oral exam section for course 3. The teacher thus strives for variety of tasks in his selections of oral tasks to be used. This is in accordance with the observations: the mechanical types of tasks were done in class whereas the ones involving more openness and authenticity were to be completed at home.

The teacher also mentions a specific task type, debate on a topic chosen by the students, as a good way to engage students in discussion and encourage them to express their own opinions. Debating can also be seen as a good example of an oral task which is highly authentic, interactive and involves free production, as it is relevant to students' interests and there is an opinion gap to fill without predetermined models of production. These answers indicate that the teacher considers the aspects of authenticity, interactivity and openness in his choices of oral tasks.

4.6.3 Significance of the matriculation examination

It was observed that preparing for the matriculation examination was notably emphasised in course 6 classes, and the teacher's own views about its significance are in accordance with this observation. As already demonstrated by the apparent lack of oral tasks in the classes compared with other task types and the frequent comments made by the teacher about the subject in the classes, the fact that oral skills are currently not being tested in the matriculation examination has a significant impact on the contents of teaching. The teacher pointed out:

(4) "Voisin sanoa että on reilua opettaa sitä mitä siellä mitataan -- että pakko sen on niin kun vastata sitä."

("You could say that it is fair to teach what they measure there [in the matriculation exam] -- it does have to sort of be equivalent to that.")

These findings are in agreement with previous research, which suggests that even though the teaching of oral skills is considered important, the fact that they are not evaluated in the matriculation exam often causes a lack in teaching them to students (Takala 1993: 4; Huuskonen 2006: 82; Kaski-Akhawan 2013: 46).

When asked about his opinion on the inclusion of an oral test in the matriculation exam, the teacher expressed his support for it and said that it will "for sure" affect what is being taught. He also brought up the complex relationship between the National Core Curriculum and the matriculation exam:

(5) "-- periaatteessa OPS ja yo on eri asia että pitäis opettaa ne asiat mitä OPSissa on mutta kyllähän ne kulkee käsi kädessä."

("-- basically the National Core Curriculum and the matriculation exam are two different things and what is in the Curriculum should be taught but they do go hand in hand.")

This is in line with the observations of comments about the matriculation examination, which the teacher made during the classes and which were discussed in section 4.5.

The interview shows that the teacher has a realistic view about the actuality of oral skills teaching in his classes: he states that even though he values the teaching of oral

production and considers it to be the skill that students are likely to need the most outside of school, oral production does not play a large enough role in his teaching. The interview responses support the earlier hypothesis about the amount of oral tasks having a connection with whether the course is intended for first- or second-year students. It is notable that while the teacher enumerated authentic and open production tasks as ones that he considers 'good oral tasks', very few of them were seen in the observed classes. Those types of tasks were, however, included in the tasks to be completed at home as a part of the course exam. The factors that can affect the opportunities to practice oral skills that the teacher mentioned in the interview were also noted during the observations, such as large teaching groups and low student engagement in oral tasks. The impression that the matriculation examination plays a significant role in selecting what is being taught, which was noted in the observations, was also confirmed by the teacher in the interview.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to find out what types of oral tasks are done in upper secondary school English classes, how communicative they are, and what factors affect the choice of oral tasks done in class. The results of the study suggest that even though oral skills are considered an important aspect of one's language competence, there are many factors which affect the amount and quality of oral tasks which are done in class. The findings are in line with previous research in that it suggests that teachers consider the teaching of oral skills important but find it challenging to include in their classes (see Takala 1993, Huuskonen 2006, Kaski-Akhawan 2013). Similar reasons for the scarcity of oral tasks were enumerated in the present study as in previous research, such as the size of teaching groups and student's lack of motivation towards oral tasks. Another reason which was found in the present study is the lack of physical resources for oral skills training, namely language laboratories. This suggests that it is important to consider this aspect of language teaching while designing teaching spaces.

The types of oral tasks that were done during the observed classes fall largely into the categories of closed production according to the classification used by Mäkelä (2005). They also fall short on interactivity and authenticity. This shows that even if textbooks do include tasks which encourage more authentic, open and interactive oral production, and the teacher emphasises that these types of tasks are the best kind in his opinion, it does not mean that these tasks are necessarily frequently done in class. It is thus important to examine the actual classroom practices in regard to oral skills teaching, particularly considering that an oral section is going to be included in the matriculation exam in the near future. It must also be noted here that the tasks which were assigned to the students as a part of their final exam were significantly more communicative in all three respects: they involved fairly open production which can be seen as authentic and interactive. This demonstrates that digital platforms can offer valuable opportunities for practising and evaluating oral skills. This can also be one solution for overcoming the students' hesitancy to speak, although it can be noted that

the classroom environment would also offer valuable opportunities for interactive face-to-face communication.

As was noted in the observations and the interview, the role of the matriculation examination heavily impacts the contents of teaching in Finnish upper secondary school. Similar results have been found in previous research (see Mäkelä 2005, Huuskonen 2006). A balance should be found between conforming to the National Core Curriculum, which emphasises the role of communicative competence, and preparing the students for their important examination. As noted by the teacher in the interview, it is fair to teach to students what they need to know in order to be able to succeed in the matriculation examination. The importance of the matriculation examination may even increase in the future as universities and universities of applied sciences are heading towards emphasising the role of the certificate of matriculation in their application processes, which suggests that the effect it has on teaching may even be on the rise.

It must be considered that because this case study only focuses on five classes held by one teacher, the results cannot be generalised across the teacher's teaching as a whole or teaching of English oral skills in general in Finnish upper secondary schools. A more comprehensive view of the topic could have been obtained by observing more classes for different grade levels as well as several teachers and comparing their approaches to the teaching of oral skills. Despite the limited scope of the present study, it can, however, offer some insight into the way oral skills are being taught in upper secondary school English classes and which factors affect the amount and quality of tasks that are chosen.

In the future, it would be important to conduct further research on the teaching of oral skills in Finnish upper secondary school language classes. For example, interviewing more teachers and observing more classes across several different Finnish upper secondary schools would provide more generalisable results. Particularly since the potential inclusion of an oral section in the matriculation examination is getting closer, it is important to examine how oral skills are being taught and whether changes in

teaching practices and resources would be necessary. Oral skills are a fundamental part of the communicative language competence and it is crucial that teachers have opportunities to give them the emphasis they deserve.

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Appendix 1: Observation scheme

Classroom observation for BA thesis

Observer:

Date:

School:

Course/group:

Teacher:

Qualifications

Experience

Number of students:

Observation Scheme Attachment

Instructions

- Word for word if possible
- Language

Form of Working

- Individual
- Pair
- Group

- Listening = L
- Writing = W
- Speaking = S

Type of Oral Task

- Game = G
- Listen & Repeat = LR
- Read Aloud = RA
- Roleplay = RP
- Interview = IV
- Discussion based on a material (text/picture/other) = DIS
- Debate = DEB
- Grammar drills (e.g. A/B exercise, direct translation) = GD
- Teacher asks a question = TQ, (addressed to whole group or one student?)
- OTHER = O

Appendix 2: Interview questions

HAASTATTELU

Mikä tutkinto sinulla on?

Minkä ikäinen olet?

Kauanko olet toiminut opettajana?

1.

Millä tavoin valmistelet oppituntejasi etukäteen?

Kun suunnittelet oppitunnin sisältöjä, mitä tekijöitä otat huomioon (esimerkiksi oppikirjan asioiden käsittely mahdollisimman tarkasti, kurssin ydintavoitteiden saavuttaminen jne.?)

2.

Millä tavoin opetuksessasi painottuvat kielen neljä osa-aluetta (lukeminen, kirjoittaminen, puhuminen ja kuunteleminen)?

3.

Mikä on näkemyksesi suullisen kielitaidon opettamisen merkityksestä lukiossa?

Mihin oppilaat tarvitsevat suullista kielitaitoa?

4.

Mitkä tekijät voivat vaikuttaa mahdollisuuksiin harjoitella suullista kielitaitoa tunneillasi?

5.

Miten määrittelisit termin "suullinen tehtävä"?

Millaisia suullisia tehtäviä yleensä käytät opetuksessasi?

Miksi käytät juuri tällaisia tehtäviä?

Mitkä tehtävät ovat mielestäsi toimivia?

Mitkä taas olet todennut vähemmän hyviksi?

6.

Käytätkö oppikirjan suullisia tehtäviä?

Ovatko ne mielestäsi tarkoituksenmukaisia?

Käytätkö muita materiaaleja suullisen kielitaidon opetuksessa?

Jos käytät, millaisia nämä materiaalit ovat?

Mistä ne ovat peräisin?

Entä teetkö suullisen kielitaidon opetusmateriaaleja itse?

7.

Tehtiinkö kolmen observoidun oppitunnin aikana tyypillinen määrä suullisia tehtäviä verrattuna oppitunteihisi yleensä, vai olivatko nämä tunnit jollain tavalla poikkeavia tässä suhteessa?

8.

Vaikuttaako opiskelijoiden valmistaminen ylioppilaskirjoituksiin opetuksesi sisältöihin? Miten? Pidätkö sitä merkittävänä tekijänä suunnitellessasi opetustasi?

9.

Kielten ylioppilaskokeisiin on suunnitteilla sisällyttää suullinen osio lähivuosina, mitä ajatuksia se herättää sinussa?

Luuletko, että tällä tulee olemaan vaikutusta siihen, minkä verran painotat suullista kielitaitoa opetuksessasi?

Keskitytäänkö suulliseen kielitaitoon mahdollisesti vähemmän muilla kursseilla, koska siihen erikoistunut valinnainen kurssi on tarjolla?