

**SPOKEN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY DURING ENGLISH LESSONS  
AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Vieraan kielen puhuminen voi aiheuttaa ihmisissä jännityksen tunteita. Vieraan kielen puhumisesta aiheutuvaa jännitystä ja kieliahdistusta on tutkittu jo 1980-luvun loppupuolelta lähtien. Kieliahdistukseen voi liittyä sekä fyysisiä että psyykkisiä oireita, jotka voivat haitata vieraan kielen opiskelua ja oppimista. Kieliahdistusta esiintyy esimerkiksi vieraiden kielten oppitunneilla, joilla oppilaat joutuvat osoittamaan suullista osaamistaan erilaisissa puhetilanteissa.</p> <p>Vaikka kieliahdistusta on tutkittu jo aiemmin, aihetta ei ole tarkasteltu vielä kovinkaan paljon suomalaisessa kouluympäristössä ja erityisesti englannin kielen oppitunneilla. Aikaisemmat tutkimukset ovat keskittyneet muun muassa kieliahdistuksen aiheuttajiin ja seuraamuksiin. Koska kieliahdistuksella on osoitettu olevan negatiivisia seurauksia oppilaiden motivaatioon ja opintomenestykseen, tämä maisterintutkielma selvittää, miten suomalaiset yläasteikäiset oppilaat kokevat puhutun englannin aiheuttaman kieliahdistuksen englannin kielen oppitunneilla, ja miten sitä voitaisiin heidän mielestään helpottaa. Vastauksia tähän kysymykseen etsitään oppilailta itseltään, joiden ehdotuksia kieliahdistuksen vähentämiseksi käsitellään tässä maisterintutkielmassa.</p> <p>Tutkielman aineisto kerättiin yhdessä suomalaisessa yhtenäiskoulussa, josta tutkimukseen osallistui 58 oppilasta luokka-asteilta seitsemän, kahdeksan ja yhdeksän. Aineisto kerättiin kyselylomakkeella, johon sisältyi 18 Likert-asteikkoa hyödyntävää kysymystä sekä 9 avointa kysymystä, joihin oppilaat kirjoittivat vastauksensa vapaasti. Tutkielmassa tutkittiin, kuinka kyseiset oppilaat kokevat suullisen englannin kielen käytön vaikuttavan heidän kieliahdistukseensa. Kieliahdistusta tarkasteltiin koko oppilasryhmän sisällä sekä sukupuolen ja englannin arvosanan perusteella. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa pyydettiin oppilaita esittämään ehdotuksia, jotka vähentäisivät heidän kieliahdistustaan englannin kielen tunneilla ja tekisivät englannin kielen puhumisesta vielä entistä miellyttävämpää. Saatu aineisto analysoitiin pääasiallisesti sisällönanalyysillä.</p> <p>Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että oppilaat kokevat kieliahdistusta puhuessaan englantia englannin kielen oppitunneilla. Tytöt raportoivat kokevansa kieliahdistusta useammin kuin pojat. Sen sijaan englannin arvosana ei tuntunut vaikuttavan kokemukseen kieliahdistuksesta. Tutkielman oppilaat esittivät ehdotuksia kieliahdistuksen vähentämiseksi verrattain vähän. Oppilaiden antamia ehdotuksia olivat muun muassa oman kielitaidon parantaminen, valinnanvapauden lisääminen oppitunneilla sekä kannustavan ja positiivisen ilmapiirin luominen.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

“Mä en sit aio sanoo sanaakaan englanniks näillä tunneilla” (“I’m not going to speak a single word in English during these lessons”).

The above utterance was declaimed to me during a seventh-grade English lesson while I was having my first teaching practice. The student in question was adamant that they would refuse to speak English during the lessons and would only give answers in Finnish. Quite perplexed, I was left wondering why a student would portray such strong negative emotions towards speaking English during the lessons. However, I was not alone with this issue, as my fellow student teachers and guiding teacher reported similar observations, where students refused to give any demonstrations of their spoken English proficiency. My guiding teacher bemoaned how it was impossible for her to grade a student when she was not given anything to grade. I believe that students might feel anxious having to speak English out loud during lessons. Perhaps they are self-conscious about their pronunciation or English proficiency. Since speaking is an activity that is more easily observed by others than, for example, completing written tasks, it may induce anxiety among students. On that account, the present study examines reasons for students’ unwillingness to speak English during English lessons and aims to provide student-initiated means to make it more sustainable for students to speak English during lessons.

Foreign language classroom anxiety is not a new phenomenon - quite contrary, it has been researched since the late 1980s by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) and new research has been published ever since (e.g., Huang 2012, Nilsson 2019, Ojansuu 2021). However, the Finnish context needs more academic research. The classroom settings in Finland can be quite different from their Turkish or Chinese counterparts, as presented by Yılmaz (2010) and Liu, Meihua and Jackson (2008), respectively, both in learning methods and materials. Thus, it is important to study foreign language classroom anxiety in a foreign language specifically in a Finnish setting. By doing so, we can see potential differences between foreign language classrooms in Finland and other countries, and we can better reduce foreign language anxiety among Finnish students by understanding how exactly it affects them. In addition, the experiences, and views of students themselves are rarely discussed in research. Therefore, the

present study is interested in the experiences, suggestions, and thoughts of the students themselves, and aims to propose possible solutions to foreign language classroom anxiety and students' unwillingness to communicate by utilizing the ideas given by students themselves.

The importance of spoken English language and its evaluation has recently been discussed in the Finnish national core curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education 2016). Finnish upper secondary school students are now being assessed in their English matriculation exams not only by their skills in writing and reading but also in speaking. The national core curriculum for upper secondary school education states that “[i]n language teaching, in addition to other areas of language skills, a student is assessed by their oral language skills. Oral language proficiency can be assessed with a separate test.” (Finnish National Board of Education 2016). Furthermore, foreign language teaching is also being introduced during an earlier time in students' education (Finnish National Board of Education 2019). It is therefore evident that in order for teachers to evaluate the skills of their students, students should partake in the spoken language contexts during foreign language lessons.

The thesis is structured followingly: chapters 2.1–2.4 focus on different aspects of foreign language anxiety, whereas chapters 3.1–3.4 describe the aim and research questions, data and its collection and analysis methods and participants of the present study. In chapters 4.1 through 4.5, the findings of the present study are presented. The present study is concluded in chapter 5 by the implications of presented findings and suggestions for future research.

## **2 FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY**

In this chapter, the concept of foreign language is explained. Some important factors that contribute towards foreign language anxiety, such as gender, school grade and English grade, are introduced, since these factors are examined in the present study as well. The effects and causes of foreign language anxiety are presented, as well as means to alleviate them.

### **2.1 The concept of foreign language anxiety**

Zeidner and Matthews (2011: 2) describe anxiety as a feeling that affects an individual both mentally and physically, often making the individual feel nervous and tense, as well as experiencing bodily activation, such as perspiration or a pounding heart. In short, anxiety can be seen as a detrimental phenomenon when it comes to human behaviour. However, short term anxiety (anxiety that lasts for a relatively short period of time) has some positive effects as well, such as making a person more empathetic and increasing their ability to perceive the emotions of other people (Tibi-Elhanany & Shamay-Tsoory 2011). Furthermore, Alpert and Haber (1960: 207), describe situations in which anxiety can be seen as facilitating anxiety that may in fact benefit students' academic performance. In their study, some students reported to perform better in high stakes situations and work most effectively under pressure (Alpert & Haber 1960: 215). These results, which were reported over 60 years ago, were also replicated by Nascenta in 2001. It is therefore possible for anxiety to both increase and decrease the performance of individuals, depending on their reception of anxiety.

When examining anxiety in a foreign language learning setting, however, it is often seen as a negative feeling. According to Horwitz et al. (1986: 70), anxiety that is associated with foreign language learning is categorized as a specific anxiety reaction. In this context, a specific anxiety reaction is thus directly related to foreign language learning in a classroom. Basically, students who do not normally suffer from anxiety may experience feelings of anxiousness only during foreign language lessons. This notion is backed up by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991: 90), who describe a situation specific anxiety; anxiety that is limited to a specific context. These situations do not have to be identical, but they are closely related. Foreign language anxiety is an example of a situation specific anxiety reaction. Horwitz et al. (1986: 128) define language anxiety as a "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." In other words, foreign language learning settings, such as classrooms, in conjunction with the

views of students during said foreign language learning settings contribute to a unique anxiety inducing experience that is different from other forms of anxiety. It is thus necessary to scrutinize foreign language anxiety as a separate entity from the general definition of anxiety given by the American psychologist association, for example. Furthermore, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991: 91) argue that studying situation specific anxiety offers better understanding of anxiety by eliminating assumptions related to the causes of said anxiety, since the anxiety inducing situation is already clearly defined. Therefore, it is easier to find possible solutions to these situations.

Among potential factors that contribute towards anxiety, gender can be seen as one. The study by Khesht-Masjedi et. al. (2019) shows that female teenagers showcase higher levels of anxiety than male teenagers. The differences in anxiety between boys and girls have also been researched by, for example, Shaw (1995: 117). Furthermore, students' age can play a role when examining their foreign language anxiety. In addition, one's English grade may affect how anxious students feel. Studies, such as Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) and Liu and Huang (2011), have examined how foreign language anxiety affects students' academic performance. Similar studies have been presented by other researchers as well (Anyadubalu 2009). These factors are scrutinized in the present study as well.

## 2.2 Causes for foreign language anxiety

As discussed above, foreign language anxiety can be considered as a separate entity from other forms of anxiety. Since foreign language anxiety is a situation specific anxiety reaction, it is crucial to examine the factors present during those situations to better understand the causes behind the said anxiety. Multiple researchers have studied foreign language anxiety among students, especially when it comes to spoken language. Liu and Jackson (2008) examined Chinese first-year undergraduates and found that anxiety during classes was associated with students' own perceptions of their English language proficiency and access to English. Even though most students were anxious about speaking English during lessons, they had no issues speaking English in their spare time (Liu & Jackson 2008). It is therefore evident that the classroom environment is making students uneasy and anxious about using their spoken English.

Foreign language classrooms offer various ways to induce anxiety among students. Sources for such anxieties can stem from intrapersonal factors, such as self-esteem, attitude, decisions and self-regulation and interpersonal factors, such as low self-confidence and competitiveness; in other words, comparing one's skills to those of the classmates, or to an unrealistic picture of oneself (Young 1991, quoted by Ojansuu 2021: 13). Students may also possess unrealistic expectations of the level of proficiency expected of them by their teacher, as well as consider flawlessness to be extremely important and mistake-making during speech to be unsatisfactory (Young 1991, quoted by Ojansuu, 2021: 13). The thought that the only acceptable way of speaking is a mistake-free and fluent speech causes students a lot of anxiety, especially if they struggle with forming spoken language. Another source of anxiety is language testing. These tests induce anxiety especially if the testing seems to emphasize evaluation, includes new types of exercises, or when the skills tested differ from the skills that have been taught in class (Young 1991, quoted by Ojansuu 2021: 14).

Different foreign language classroom activities can also cause anxiety among students. Activities such as giving an oral presentation, answering teacher's questions aloud, role-playing in front of other students and participating in formal or group discussions were found to be anxiety inducing (Woodrow, 2006). It appears that foreign language anxiety is often present in situations where students have other people, either a teacher or other students, around to hear them speak. This may be due to the students feeling like they are in a situation that is somewhat "formal;" that is, having multiple participants and being the centre of attention. Woodrow (2006) adds that students were also stressed about having to converse with a native English speaker. This is evident in a comment made by a non-native English speaker in Woodrow's study (2006: 320), who says:

"I feel anxiety when I talk with native English speakers because I know my English...my speaking English...is not correct, so maybe it makes the native English speakers confused and maybe sometimes what I'm speaking...what I'm talking about is not interesting to native speakers. I think so these kinds of things."

This citation highlights how students are afraid of being judged for their lower level of foreign language proficiency, especially when talking to someone who speaks the language as their mother tongue. There is also the risk of being misunderstood or not understood at all, which makes the situation anxiety inducing. Furthermore, they can think that what they have to say is



not interesting to the other party, perhaps because they cannot articulate their thoughts as clearly as they would in their own mother tongue.

Another point of view to foreign language anxiety can be seen by Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daley (1999: 222), who have studied foreign language anxiety among English-speaking students learning French, Spanish, German and Japanese outside of a classroom setting. In their study, Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999: 225-226) deduced that there are a variety of factors that contribute to foreign language anxiety. Some interpersonal factors were, for example, the sense of their own creativity and intellectual ability, level of humour, individualism, as well as self-worth. Intrapersonal factors include cooperativeness, how students believe to be seen by others and how they were accepted into the society. Experiences related to foreign language learning include whether they had visited the country of target language before, as well as prior experiences with foreign languages in high school. Other factors were related to academic competence and expectations for the future. These factors were the expected grade for the language course they were enrolled in, scholastic qualifications, how much value they placed on competitive learning, and perceived job competence. Worth noting is that the participants in the study were aged between 18 and 71 years. Therefore, some of these findings, such as prior high school experience with foreign languages, perceived job competence or age are in general not applicable to a junior high school classroom setting, where the students are same age minors without a high school background. Regardless, the above-mentioned factors all contribute to foreign language anxiety and can still be used as a baseline when examining foreign language anxiety in a classroom setting. For example, expected overall average for current language courses, perceived intellectual ability, perceived social acceptance, perceived level of humour, perceived self-worth, cooperativeness and individualism are likely to emerge in classroom environments and therefore may cause foreign language anxiety among students. Students may be worried about their own grade and how it compares to the classroom average, worry about their level of skill when it comes to using a foreign language, be afraid of how other classmates might perceive them, have low self-esteem, dislike working with other people or have some other unique and individual characteristics which induce anxiety.

Research has shown that the role of a teacher is important when alleviating foreign language anxiety. By having a positive attitude towards teaching and utilizing teaching strategies that encourage students, teachers can mitigate some of the foreign language anxiety students may face (Gregersen 2003). On the contrary, Von Wörde (2003) showcases a negative habitude

where students were often interrupted by a teacher who pointed out their errors, often before the student had sufficient time to correct their mistakes that they had already noticed themselves. These interruptions caused students to be “stupefied” and become frustrated. Gregersen (2003) suggests that teachers should give sensitive feedback to students while correcting their mistakes. He states that students are more likely to take in the feedback given by their teachers if they feel like the teacher is not out hunting for all and every mistake they make (Gregersen 2003). Students may already be anxious about receiving feedback, so doing it in a positive manner may reduce the amount of anxiety students feel. Researchers, such as Dewaele and Macintyre (2014: 259), point out that a teacher who can create a positive learning environment is not only appreciated by the students but also increases their willingness to improve. A positive learning environment can also alleviate anxiety, since a positive atmosphere does not focus too heavily on mistakes. Other factors that students often attribute to anxiety during language classes are negative classroom experiences (mocking, ridiculing, humiliating), the fear of getting poorly evaluated, bad pedagogical practices used during lessons (class moving too quickly, too much material to learn, making students answer one after another in seating order) and, as stated above, sometimes even the teachers themselves (von Wörde, 2003). Thus, both the evaluation itself and the way it is presented to students may cause extra anxiety for students.

Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999: 228) conclude that there are three major predictors that can be used to indicate foreign language anxiety in students. These three predictors are:

1. how students perceive their own success during foreign language learning lessons,
2. perceived self-worth, and
3. perceived scholastic competence.

Students’ scholastic competence in English and their performance during English lessons can thus be used to predict possible foreign language anxiety. In addition, students’ perceived self-worth affects how likely they are to suffer from foreign language anxiety – students with lower levels of perceived self-worth may be more subject for foreign language anxiety than students with higher levels of perceived self-worth (Onwuegbuzie et al. 1999: 228).

### 2.3 Effects of foreign language anxiety

The predictors for foreign language anxiety presented in chapter 2.2 above affect students in different ways. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999: 228) argue that they:

1. lower students' course expectations, perceived self-worth and perceived scholastic competence,
2. increase the level of foreign language anxiety,
3. recursively increase and ultimately maximize foreign language anxiety and likewise recursively decrease and ultimately minimize course expectations, perceived self-worth and perceived scholastic competence, as well as
4. create inaccurate and overly negative expectations, consequently reduce motivation, effort, and achievement.

These findings suggest that prolonged foreign language anxiety is detrimental to students' well-being and academic success. By making erroneous deductions of their own performance, students may end up in a situation where they risk giving up learning and using a foreign language. Not only do these misconceived deductions negatively affect students' performance during foreign language lessons but they also distort their perceptions of themselves. Even though the above-mentioned effects do not manifest themselves in every student with foreign language anxiety and may require substantial amounts of foreign language anxiety, these issues are undoubtedly harmful.

Foreign language anxiety can cause various symptoms in students. Horwitz et al. (1986) report students suffering from physical symptoms, such as tenseness, trembling, sleep disturbances and other psychological symptoms, as well as intrapersonal symptoms relating to forming speech, for example, forgetting what they had learned before taking tests or blanking out during presentations. Similar findings have been presented by Hashemi and Abbasi (2013), who described students blushing, perspiring, having too fast or too slow speech, avoiding eye contact, showing a lack enthusiasm, staggering and completely avoiding anxiety inducing situations. However, the effects of foreign language anxiety are not limited to physical symptoms. Kráľová (2016: 20-21) states that foreign language anxiety hinders students' abilities to learn and perform using a foreign language. It is thus apparent that foreign language anxiety has both psychological and physical effects that negatively affect a student's ability to perform, as well as possibly weakening their overall quality of life.

Students are often anxious about their upcoming presentation or test, which may divide their attention from learning towards worrying. Eysenck (1979: 366-367), whose research focuses on how anxiety is formed by different cognitive functions, highlights that task-relevant information, such as teacher giving instructions or teaching, is often missed by students who are more focused on task-irrelevant cognitive activities, such as self-concern or anxiety. Eysenck (1979: 366-367) argues that anxious students find themselves in divided-attention situations, effectively impairing their performance in task-relevant cognitive activities, such as mental planning and task performance. It is often the case that students focus on mentally preparing for an upcoming oral presentation, during which they risk missing the rest of the lesson. Students who experience only little or no anxiety may be more receptive to the information given prior to anxiety inducing events, thus performing better and learning more effectively (Eysenck 1979: 366-367).

Foreign language learning is also deeply intertwined with foreign language anxiety. Those who suffer little or no foreign language anxiety are more likely to perform better in foreign language tests than those who suffer from foreign language anxiety (Gardner & MacIntyre 1993, Gardner & MacIntyre 1991, quoted by Luo 2013: 450). These findings are in accordance with the study of Liu and Huang (2011), who studied the relationship between foreign language anxiety, motivation and performance while using English as a second language among Chinese first year university students. They found a clear correlation between foreign language anxiety and students' performance in English, as well as a correlation between motivation and students' performance in English (Liu & Huang 2011). Foreign language anxiety indicated a worse performance, whereas higher motivation was linked to a better performance. Similar results have been reported by Anyadubalu (2009), who states that among middle-school students in Thailand, students with low levels of English language anxiety scored better in English tests than those with high levels of English language anxiety. It is likely that students who suffer from foreign language anxiety are consequently less motivated as well, causing them to perform more poorly than their classmates who suffer from only little or no anxiety (Anyadubalu 2009).

Foreign language anxiety is often a reason for students' worsening academic performance. Gregersen (2003) notes that as anxious students make errors, their levels of anxiety increase, leading to more errors being made, which becomes a self-feeding circle. Furthermore, anxious students believe that the number of errors they make is significantly higher than the actual

number of errors they make. They also overestimate the severity of their errors. (Gregersen 2003). In highly anxious students, the fear of making errors is sometimes overshadowed by the fear of how others perceive them (Gregersen 2003). In other words, highly anxious students spend more time focusing on non-linguistic issues, such as how they appear to the rest of the class, instead of devoting their focus on their foreign language skills (Gregersen 2003).

## 2.4 Methods of reducing foreign language anxiety

Students should be assisted in reducing their foreign language anxiety. Marwan (2007) emphasizes that it is vital for students to uncover the reasons behind their foreign language anxiety and apply working remedies for them. Hu and Wang (2014) also point out that it is a teacher's responsibility to make students understand the repercussions of long-lasting foreign language anxiety. It must be noted, however, that foreign language anxiety should not be treated as a learner deficit. Rather, a teacher's task is to help students work through their anxiety and assist them in finding the core causes for it. As shown in chapter 2.2., foreign language anxiety can be caused by various factors that are present in foreign language classrooms. For this reason, it might be hard for students to pinpoint the exact cause for their anxiety. Notwithstanding, some strategies offered by Marwan (2007) are preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and peer seeking. However, such strategies may be difficult to execute. These strategies can and should be taught and described for students in detail, so that they may take them to use. Still, these strategies need first be known to teachers before they can pass them on to their students (Hu & Wang 2014).

The pedagogical practices of teachers can help alleviate the foreign language anxiety in students. Positive reinforcement and focusing on positive experiences can be used to ease students' anxiety. Chen and Chang (2004) urge teachers to improve students' perceptions of their own foreign language proficiency. This can be achieved by focusing on the tasks that the students have performed successfully and highlighting the progress the students have made. In addition, teachers should aim to be supportive and patient with students (Chen & Chang 2004). Giving students chances to succeed but also allowing them adequate time for difficult assignments is a good practice to show appreciation towards students (Hu & Wang 2014). Teachers, who had a closer and more personal relationship with their students, were also seen as helpful in reducing anxiety (von Wörde 2003). These findings are shared by Marwan (2007), who suggests building rapport with one's students and increasing their sense of involvement.

Thus, a teacher who is kind and understanding towards their students can reduce the foreign language anxiety of their students with their caring approach, and by being more personally involved with their students.

Hu and Wang (2014) state that teachers should be tolerant towards the mistakes their students make and understand that the language will be imperfect. An effective way to correct the mistakes students make is to tackle a mistake that is made by multiple students (Gregersen 2003). This way, a teacher can help students without singling out a specific person. Gregersen (2003) claims that teachers must also be clear in the type of errors they highlight; correcting an error made in an issue that has recently been discussed in class ensures that all students understand the nature of the error and the correct way of expressing it. Furthermore, knowledge about students is important when correcting mistakes. Knowing how students react to different feedback makes it possible for teachers to give students individual feedback. Gregersen (2003) states that focusing on individual differences among students yields better results in alleviating students' foreign language anxiety.

The physical setting of the classroom itself can be designed in a way that eases foreign language anxiety. A relaxed classroom environment is an effective way to reduce anxiety among students. Von Worde (2003) suggests shaping the seats of a classroom in a way that they form a semi-circle or an oval, since this enhances the feeling of belonging in a crowd or a group. This form of seating may also reduce anxiety by erasing the feeling of, as mentioned by a student in the study of von Worde (2003: 7), "being put on the spot;," in other words, calling out a single student to answer a question or having the rest of the class observe a single student talking aloud. In this semi-circular or oval seating arrangement, students were further given the opportunity to discuss among themselves before giving an answer. It must be noted that having a seating arrangement does not necessarily reduce anxiety. Rather, they can be used in a way that gives students opportunities to talk among their classmates before giving out an answer. It is not necessary to use a semi-circle or an oval, as long as students are seated in a way that makes talking to one another possible. Having the backup of a group can help relieve the anxiety of giving an answer for the rest of the class. Furthermore, well-structured, and organized study and work groups may reduce anxiety (von Worde 2003).

As discussed above, group work can be effectively used to alleviate foreign language anxiety. Nagahashi (2007: 57) argues for cooperative learning, which consists of the following elements:

1. A group having a common goal, towards which each group members' contribution is equal in value,
2. Face-to-face group work, where group members help and learn from each other,
3. Individual and group accountability,
4. Practice of social skills in negotiation and interaction, and
5. Evaluation and reflection of group's work and performance.

By utilizing cooperative learning that includes the above-mentioned elements, Nagahashi (2007) argues that a decrease in foreign language anxiety can be seen among students. He believes that this is because students are able to practice their speaking skills in smaller groups that offer support and encouragement (Nagahashi 2007). Additionally, these small groups give students more opportunities to practice speaking a language in a less anxiety inducing environment. Since all the group members are working towards a common goal, the fear of making mistakes in speech, for example, is smaller. It is also likely that students are more willing to participate in discussions in small groups than with the whole class listening, for example (Nagahashi 2007).

Foreign language anxiety does not always focus solely on factors related to the language itself. Hu and Wang (2014) argue that without the knowledge of the society with its cultural norms, traditions, way of life, and customs, learning a foreign language becomes more difficult. Thus, the exposure to cultural norms, traditions, way of life, and customs is vital in foreign language learning and in alleviating foreign language anxiety that may be caused by the lack of societal knowledge. Hu and Wang (2014) give an example, where students are afraid of speaking a foreign language due to a fear of making a mistake related to different cultural traditions. By teaching about cultural norms, traditions, way of life, and customs, students are also given the tools to analyse the differences between the culture of their mother tongue and that of the target language, as well as identify common grounds between the two languages and cultures related to them. Hu and Wang (2014) argue that this cross-cultural awareness eases anxiety.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

In this chapter, the research aim, and research questions are introduced. The data and its collection methods are also presented, as well as the participants of the present study.

#### **3.1 Research aim and questions**

The aim of the study is to examine how students view oral English anxiety during English lessons. With this, the findings regarding foreign language anxiety as presented by researchers such as Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999), Gregersen (2003) and von Wörde (2003) are re-examined in a Finnish context. Furthermore, the aim is to ask students to innovate means to alleviate oral foreign language anxiety during English lessons.

The present study focuses specifically on Finnish junior high school students and addresses two main factors: the gender of the students and the English grade of the students. The data collection permits the present study to investigate the possible differences perceived in oral English anxiety between genders and English grades and is therefore interested in seeing whether any significant findings arise in that domain. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is oral English language anxiety experienced by junior high school students?
2. What are the differences in oral English language anxiety experienced by students of different genders?
3. What are the differences in oral English language anxiety between students with different grades in English?
4. What suggestions do students have to alleviate foreign language anxiety during English lessons?

#### **3.2 Data**

The data was collected through a 27-point online questionnaire among Finnish junior high school students (see Appendix). Questionnaires can be used to acquire information on sensitive topics anonymously, which makes it easier for respondents to answer truthfully (Patten 2014: 2). Furthermore, administering questionnaires is efficient regarding researcher's time and effort (Dörnyei & Taguchi 2009: 9). Questionnaires are also easy to produce and can be altered in a



way that makes them suitable for various target groups (Dörnyei & Taguchi 2009: 9). A well-constructed questionnaire may increase the reliability of the research, since it can reduce potential researcher bias (Bryman 2008, quoted by Dörnyei & Taguchi 2009: 6).

In the present study, the questionnaire first gathers some background information of the respondents, such as the grade they are in, their gender and their most recent English grade. Then, 18 statements were presented with a rating scale available, where the participants were asked to choose between “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “strongly disagree” and “cannot say.” This five-level Likert item, with the addition of “cannot say”, was chosen because it produces data that is easily understandable. A five-point scale was chosen instead of the more traditional seven-point Likert scale since in larger scales, people tend to navigate away from the extreme options (Jamieson 2017). Smaller scales, such as three-point scales, do not allow for sufficient discrimination of results (Jamieson 2017). Therefore, a five-point scale was a practical option for acquiring adequate data. Furthermore, using a Likert scale was believed to be familiar to the respondents, which eliminates the possibility of them not answering due to not understanding how the scaling works. Connor Desai and Reimers (2019) argue that while answering close-ended questions, participants are less likely to quit in the middle of the process. They also believe that close-ended questions can provide as desirable data as open-ended questions (Connor Desai & Reimers 2019). In the present study, close-ended questions were used to acquire comprehensive information about students’ views on foreign language anxiety. Since the questionnaire features 27 points, close-ended questions were used to acquire a large quantity of data fairly quickly. Questionnaires that consist of item choices that are simple to choose from (as is the case with a Likert scale) are also easy to tabulate, which makes it easier and less time consuming to interpret than, for example, interviews (Patten 2014: 1).

After the 18 statements, 9 open-ended questions were presented, and the participants were asked to describe their experiences regarding anxiety, and its effects and sources during oral English lessons. Participants were also asked to share their own views on how to alleviate the oral anxiety present during English lessons. These open-ended questions were chosen firstly, as open-ended questions give the participants the possibility to express their views without any limitations, giving them the freedom to describe their answers in as much detail as they wish. Consequently, more accurate and insightful responses can be acquired (Connor Desai & Reimers 2019). Second, open-ended questions avoid bias since they do not offer ready-made

responses (Connor Desai & Reimers 2019). Since the present study is specifically interested in students' own views and suggestions, open-ended questions allow for a wider range of answers and may yield results that are unpredictable or that close-ended questions would have filtered out. The open-ended questions were constructed with the 18 statements in mind; by including same themes in both statements and open-ended questions, a deeper viewpoint could be acquired.

Open-ended questions do have some challenges as well. Sometimes, participants are less likely to answer if the questionnaire consists of multiple open-ended questions (Connor Desai & Reimers 2019). To avoid this, only a few open-ended questions were chosen to the present questionnaire to minimise the risk of participants feeling discouraged from answering. However, open-ended questions rely on the participants' motivation to give the answers, which may result in either a long and detailed answer or a one-word answer. As the questionnaire touches upon a personal topic for all the participants, detailed answers could be expected.

### 3.3 Methods

The data was analysed by first using quantitative analysis on the close-ended statements, with the aim of obtaining the participants' overall views. Average values of the Likert scale were calculated for every individual statement. Answers with either heavily agree or heavily disagree were given worth +2 or -2 points, respectively. Likewise, answers with somewhat agree or somewhat disagree were worth +1 or -1 points, respectively. Answers that neither agreed nor disagreed or could not say were given 0 points. Calculated average values were either positive or negative, depending on how heavily students agreed or disagreed with the statement. These average values were then compared by gender and English grade.

The data from open-ended questions was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove 2019). Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009) state that content analysis allows for a researcher to reliably narrow down a diverse range of responses to a smaller number of key issues. By noting every distinct theme in each participants' answers, and then comparing said themes across all answers, a broader understanding of the data can be acquired (Dörnyei & Taguchi 2009). Vaismoradi and Snelgrove (2019) state that during qualitative content analysis, the data is first read through several times to gain a basic understanding of said data. Afterwards, main themes discovered by the researchers are coded in a way that relates to a

larger phenomenon (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove 2019). Thus, I first read all the answers to the open-ended questions to acquire a basic understanding of the data. Then, I highlighted distinct themes in the answers and compared individual answers with each other to see if any themes were present in multiple answers. These themes were often related to students' views of foreign language anxiety sources. Some common themes were, for pronunciation, courage, and setting. Lastly, I combined themes that were present in multiple answers and were related to each other under broader phenomena. Such phenomena were, for example, the role of a teacher, individuals' own capabilities and the impact of other classmates.

### 3.4 Participants

The participants were 58 students from a Finnish junior high school. All students were enrolled in the same junior high school and were taught English by the same teacher. There was no specific reason for the choosing of this specific junior high school apart from the fact that I had previously been in contact with said school and knew they were willing to participate in possible studies. Permission to distribute the questionnaire was requested and granted by the headmaster of the school. Afterwards, all English teachers in the school were contacted and asked for willingness to participate in the study. One of the teachers was willing to help with the gathering of data and was asked to distribute the questionnaire to the students. The distribution of participants between the three junior high genders, school grades and English grades are given in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1 Participants in the study.

<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Other / not specified</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>23</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>English grade 5-7</b>	<b>English grade 8-10</b>	<b>Not reported</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>20</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>58</b>

Table 1 portrays the participants of the present study. The table also shows the division of students between genders and English grades, as well as the total number of participants. Boys and girls are almost evenly distributed, with the present study having four more girls than boys. The distribution of students between English grades 5-7 and English grades 8-10 is, however, rather large. As only a single student reported an English grade between 4-5, making a separate group for these grades was ineligible. Furthermore, just seven students reported a grade of 5-

6, meaning that English grades 4-6 have only a total of eight students. On the contrary, English grades 7-9 had almost 10 students each. Therefore, dividing the students into other than the current groups would have created even larger differences in group size. Adding an extra group to form three groups in total was also discarded, since an even distribution between three groups was also impossible.

The participants answered the questionnaire during the English lessons that were overseen by their English teacher. The questionnaire was distributed digitally to the teacher and was only available for the students of the said teacher, so that no other than the targeted students could answer the questionnaire. The answers were given anonymously, and no personal information was gathered, which encourages participants to answer truthfully (Patten, 2014). The students were asked for consent to participate and were informed of the use of their answers in my study.

## 4 FINDINGS

In this chapter, the findings of the present study are described. First, the perceived oral English language anxiety among junior high school students is presented. Then, the above-mentioned findings are scrutinized between genders and English grades. Tables that illustrate the distribution of answers regarding the statement section of the questionnaire and citations from students on the open-ended questions (see Appendices) are included to support the analysis

### 4.1 Perceived oral English language anxiety among junior high school students

This chapter examines the perceived oral English language anxiety among junior high school students. It discusses students' participation during English lessons and other lessons, as well as how they view speaking English during lessons. Students' own views on their oral English proficiency and courage to speak English during their free time is also examined. The table below shows the participation during lessons among junior high school students.

TABLE 2 Participation during lessons among junior high school students.

	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Cannot say (%)
I like discussion activities during English lessons	72	9	16	3
I like discussion activities during other lessons	55	19	26	0
Talking to a partner or in a small group is more enjoyable than having a conversation with the whole class overseen by the teacher	86	10	4	0
I voluntarily answer questions asked by the teacher during English lessons	38	33	22	7
I actively participate during English lessons by, for example, raising my hand	47	26	25	2
I actively participate during other than	47	29	22	2

<b>English lessons, by, for example, raising my hand</b>				
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As seen in table 2, an overwhelming majority (72%) enjoyed discussion activities during English lessons and about half of the students (55%) enjoyed them during other lessons. Some students did not enjoy discussion activities during English lessons (16%) or other lessons (26%). Thus, discussion activities during English lessons appear to be more enjoyable than discussion activities during other lessons. Almost every student (86%) felt that talking to a partner or within a small group is more enjoyable than having a class-wide discussion with the teacher. Only single students (4%) disagreed with the statement. Students were somewhat more likely to answer teacher questions voluntarily during English lessons (38%) than not (22%). More students were also actively participating during English lessons (47%) than those who remained passive (25%). These statistics agree with Woodrow's (2006) findings which indicate that foreign language anxiety is often present in situations where there are many people that can listen to a student speak but speaking in a smaller group is perceived as less anxiety inducing. Table 3 portrays the causes and effects of foreign language anxiety during English lessons among junior high school students.

TABLE 3 Foreign language anxiety during English lessons among junior high school students.

	<b>Agree (%)</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree (%)</b>	<b>Disagree (%)</b>	<b>Cannot say (%)</b>
<b>I am afraid of making mistakes while speaking English during English lessons</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>I am afraid that the teacher will ask me to answer out loud during English lessons</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>I am afraid that the teacher will point out the mistakes I make while speaking English</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Even if I knew the answer to a question during English lesson, I do not answer because I am</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>0</b>

<b>afraid of making mistakes while speaking</b>				
<b>I am afraid that other students will judge me when I speak English in class</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>3</b>

As seen in Table 3, experiences regarding being afraid of making mistakes while speaking English were quite divided; slightly under half of the students (46%) were not afraid of making mistakes while speaking English, but over one third of them (38%) were. Likewise, exactly half of the students (50%) were not afraid of having to answer questions out loud during English lessons, but then again, almost half of them (43%) were. Even though Woodrow (2006) highlights how having to answer a teacher's question aloud may cause anxiety among students, students are less anxious to do so if they are given the choice between answering or not answering. One student in the present study puts into words how it feels when the teacher asks them to answer a question when they are not willing to answer:

(1) "So that they [the teacher] would not be like, well, you give me an answer but so that you could decide to answer if you wanted to. Because that is the most anxious situation and then you usually screw up by thinking too much." - Girl, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

Thus, students seem to respond more positively when they can dictate whether they want to answer or not, rather than being forced into an uncomfortable situation in which they feel unprepared and distressed. However, the same amount of active participation was seen during other lessons as well (47%). It may be that students are unwilling to answer when they feel like they do not know the answer and feel anxious when the teacher asks them to answer anyway, regardless of the lesson. However, some of the students stated that the teacher was the reason for them being less anxious during English lessons than during other lessons. When asked if they are anxious about speaking English during lessons, one student states that

(2) "No because [teacher's name] is the best<3 but with other teachers yes." – Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

Thus, a teacher can alleviate some of the foreign language anxiety by utilizing meaningful pedagogical practices, such as building a rapport with a student or being understanding of their mistakes, as suggested by von Wörde (2003) and Marwan (2007).

Half of the students (50%) were not afraid of having their mistakes being pointed out by their teacher while speaking English, whereas about one quarter of the students (27%) were. More students were afraid of being judged by their peers (36%), rather than their teacher (27%), while speaking English. Comparing one's skills to those of the classmates has been shown to induce anxiety among students (Young, 1991, quoted by Ojansuu, 2021). Therefore, students might compare their own speaking to their classmates speaking, and consequently be anxious about how they view them. Furthermore, students in the present study were anxious about the possibility of being ridiculed or made fun of by their classmates. When asked what other students could do to make speaking English even more enjoyable during lessons, students state that:

(3) "Not laughing at anyone or commenting on others' pronunciation." - Girl, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

(4) "They shouldn't at least judge others or laugh, if someone gets it wrong." - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

Thus, students seem to be anxious about how their classmates will react if they make mistakes while speaking English. Especially the possibility of mean comments or laughing were seen as anxiety inducing. Still, around the same number of students (45%) were yet again unaffected by this type of anxiety.

About half of the students (49%) also needed time to think about what to say before they felt ready to talk during English lessons, whereas about a third of the students (35%) did not feel like needing time to think before being able to answer. Table 4 shows how students view their oral English proficiency when compared to their classmates, their courage to speak English during their free time as well as their linguistic awareness.

TABLE 4 Perceived English proficiency, speaking courage and linguistic awareness among junior high school students.

	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Cannot say (%)
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<b>Other students are better at speaking English than I am</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>I have the courage to speak English during my free time</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>I am less nervous when speaking English during my free time than when speaking during English lessons</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>I can tell what mistakes I make while speaking English</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>I wish that the teacher will help me correct the mistakes I make while speaking English</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>I need time to think beforehand about what I am going to say before I can speak during English lessons</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 4 shows that the difference in distribution between students who believe that they are worse at speaking English than their classmates (44%) and students who do not believe this to be the case (26%) is quite large. This disparity is somewhat backed up by the slightly larger number of students who do not answer questions during English lessons due to the fear of making mistakes while speaking English (45%), than those who do not experience this fear (39%) (see table 3). Research has shown (e.g., Young, 1991, quoted by Ojansuu, 2021) that students might possess unrealistic expectations regarding the level of proficiency that is expected of them in English. Based on these false expectations, students may view others as better English speakers than themselves, which may further increase the anxiety they have while having to speak English. When asked how students could personally make speaking English even more enjoyable during lessons, one student believes that trusting in their own skills more would and encouraging others would make it more enjoyable and less anxiety inducing to speak English during lessons:

(5) "Being more confident in my own skills and more encouraging towards others." - Girl, 9th grade, EG 8-10

A large majority of the students (79%) could tell what kind of mistakes they make while speaking English, whereas just a small percentage of them (4%) could not identify their own mistakes. These findings support the idea of students understanding their own mistakes. Additionally, over half of the students (57%) hoped that their teacher would help them correct the mistakes they make while speaking English, and some of them (8%) did not.

Nevertheless, a large majority of students (74%) stated that they have the courage to speak English during their free time. Similar findings have been shown by Liu and Jackson (2008), who noted that even though Chinese first-year undergraduates were anxious about speaking English during lessons, they felt less anxious when speaking English during their free time. Furthermore, slightly over half of the students (54%) felt that speaking English during their free time made them less anxious than speaking during English lessons, but around a fifth of the students (21%) did not think so. Since speaking English during one's free time might not be a formal setting like in a classroom (e.g., Woodrow, 2006), speaking English during their free time might be less anxiety inducing for students. Only a handful of students (7%) reported that they do not have the courage to speak English during their free time.

When asked whether being anxious during English lessons has affected how well they perform in English, out of 56 students, 59% responded that it has not affected their English performance, 25% answered that it had indeed affected their English performance and 8% were unsure whether it had affected them or not. From the remaining four students, one student stated that anxiety during English lessons did not affect their studies but rather how active they are during English lessons. The second student said that anxiety makes them perform better during tests. Third student explicitly stated that anxiety has made studying harder for them. The fourth student simply said, "I do my best." Studies have shown that foreign language anxiety may cause worsening academic performance in students (e.g., Gregersen, 2003; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Due to the limited scope of the present study, explicit information about the effects of foreign language anxiety on students' academic performance in English was not thoroughly examined. Even though over half of the students reported that anxiety had not

affected how well they performed in English, a quarter stated that it had had an effect. This number can be considered significant enough to warrant future research.

#### 4.2 Differences in perceived oral English anxiety between genders

There were 23 participants who identified as boys, 27 who identified as girls and 4 who identified as some other gender identity and 4 who did not specify their gender. In this part of the study, those who did not specify their gender were excluded from the analysis, as well as those who identified as other gender identities. This was done due to the small number of participants who identified as gender identities, since analysing their responses would most likely have been analysing the characteristics of a few individuals rather than a larger group of students. The table below shows the participation during lessons among genders.

TABLE 5 Participation during lessons among boys (n=23) and girls (n=27).

	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Cannot say (%)
I like discussion activities during English lessons	87 67	9 7	4 19	0 7
I like discussion activities during other lessons	65 59	22 15	13 26	0 0
Talking to a partner or in a small group is more enjoyable than having a conversation with the whole class overseen by the teacher	87 89	13 4	0 7	0 0
I voluntarily answer questions asked by the teacher during English lessons	48 30	35 37	17 26	0 7
I actively participate during English lessons by, for example, raising my hand	65 33	26 22	9 41	0 4
I actively participate during other than English lessons, by, for example, raising my hand	70 41	26 22	4 37	0 0

As shown in the table above, boys almost univocally (87%) agreed with the statement, “I like discussion activities during English lessons.” Only a few (4%) disagreed. Girls were not as keen on having discussion activities but most of them still found them enjoyable, as two thirds of them (67%) agreed with the above-mentioned statement. About a fifth of the girls (19%) disagreed.

Both boys and girls were more likely to enjoy discussion activities during other lessons and reported similar statistics; two thirds of boys (67%) agreed with the statement, “I enjoy discussion activities during other lessons (e.g., biology, Finnish, etc.)” and little over half of the girls (59%) also agreed. Neither group reported more than one third disagreeing with the statement. When stated that “talking to a partner or in a small group is more enjoyable than having a conversation with the whole class overseen by the teacher,” majority of both boys (87%) and girls (89%) agreed. Only a handful of girls (7%) disagreed, and a small percentage (4%) did not agree nor disagree. None of the boys disagreed with the statement but some of them (13%) did not disagree nor agree.

When asked if the students often voluntarily answer questions asked by the teacher during English lessons, slightly under half of the boys (48%) agreed. Over a third (35%) chose to neither agree nor disagree. Almost one fifth of the boys (17%) disagreed with the statement. Girls were less likely than boys to answer teacher’s questions. Only under a third (30%) agreed that they voluntarily answer the teacher's questions during English lessons. Over a third (37%) did not either agree nor disagree, and around a quarter (26%) disagreed.

Boys were more active during English lessons than girls, since almost two thirds (65%) stated that they actively participate during English lessons by, for example, raising their hand, whereas only a third of the girls (33%) reported the same. Only a fraction of boys (9%) stated that they do not actively participate during English lessons, whereas girls were over four times less likely to actively participate during English classes (41%). The findings from active participation during other than English lessons mirror the data from the previous questions with boys reporting being more active than girls during lessons. Around two thirds of boys (65%) reported being active during other than English lessons but only under half of girls (41%) reported the same. Table 6 shows the causes and effects of foreign language anxiety during English lessons among genders.

TABLE 6 Foreign language anxiety during English lessons between boys (n=23) and girls (n=27).

	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Cannot say (%)
I am afraid of making mistakes while speaking English during English lessons	27 59	18 11	50 30	5 0
I am afraid that the teacher will ask me to answer out loud during English lessons	39 67	0 0	61 33	0 0
Even if I knew the answer to a question during English lesson, I do not answer because I am afraid of making mistakes while speaking	23 63	9 15	68 22	0 0
I am afraid that the teacher will point out the mistakes I make while speaking English	9 40	13 15	78 34	0 11
I am afraid that other students will judge me when I speak English in class	13 55	13 15	74 26	0 4

As seen in Table 6, only slightly over a quarter of the boys (27%) stated that they were anxious about making mistakes while speaking English during English lessons. On the other hand, half of the boys (50%) were not anxious about making mistakes. Girls, however, felt much more anxious about making mistakes, since over half of them (59%) were anxious about making mistakes while speaking English in class. Only around a third of the girls (30%) did not feel anxious about making mistakes while speaking English during lessons.

Of the boys, somewhat under half (39%) agreed that they were anxious that the teacher would ask them to answer out loud during English lessons. Almost two thirds of them (61%) did not feel this anxiety. From girls, close to two thirds (67%) admitted feeling anxious about a teacher asking them to answer out loud. The remaining third (33%) did not feel anxious. However, boys did not appear to be too anxious about getting their mistakes corrected by their English teacher; only a few of them (9%) agreed with the statement, "I am afraid that the teacher will

point out the mistakes I make while speaking English”. An overwhelming majority of boys (78%) disagreed with the above-mentioned statement. Girls were more anxious about getting corrected. Two fifths (40%) agreed that they were anxious about getting their mistakes pointed out by their English teacher, whereas only around a third (34%) disagreed. A few girls (15%) did neither agree nor disagree.

Boys were seemingly unconcerned about being judged by others. When given the statement “I am afraid that others will judge me when I speak English in class,” only a few (13%) agreed, whereas over two thirds (74%) disagreed. Girls, on the other hand, were more anxious about the opinions of others; over half of them (55%) agreed with the statement. Only around a quarter (26%) did not feel anxious about being judged by others. When presented with the statement “even if I knew the answer to a question during English lesson, I do not answer because I am afraid of making mistakes while speaking”, about a quarter of the boys (23%) agreed. Over two thirds (74%) disagreed. Almost two thirds of girls (63%) agreed with said statement and almost a quarter (22%) disagreed. Only a handful of both boys (9%) and girls (15%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Studies, such as Khesht-Masjedi et. al. (2019), have shown that female teenagers show higher levels of anxiety than male teenagers. When asked if speaking English during lessons makes the participants of the present study anxious, only three boys reported different levels of anxiety, whereas 13 girls stated the same. Whereas boys stated that the anxiety manifested as “normal anxiety”, or as a “quivering voice”, girls were much more descriptive when portraying their feelings of anxiety. Some girls described their anxiety as follows:

(6) “[I] am anxious about speaking English during lessons and my anxiety manifests maybe in such ways that I look around myself a lot or just my desk and my legs are shaking” - Girl, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

(7) “[Speaking English makes me] a little nervous, I start to panic about whether I can do it. It would make it easier to speak with a similar student who can speak English in the same way as oneself.” - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 5-7

(8) “I am somewhat anxious, but only sometimes. I am afraid that I will give the wrong answer and thus I often refrain from answering. I do not, for example, perspire or my voice does not quiver, so I do not feel like I’m ‘properly’ anxious.” - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

First, girls report symptoms of anxiety more often than boys. Second, girls are more descriptive than boys when explaining how their anxiety manifests. However, since boys reported feeling less anxious, it cannot be stated that girls more readily explain how they experience anxiety but rather that boys simply seem to experience it less. Worth noting is how in the third quote, the student believes that not having physical symptoms of anxiety does not make them “properly” anxious, even though studies such as Zeidner & Matthews (2011: 2) have shown that anxiety can have both physical and psychological symptoms. It may be that some of the students who stated that they were not anxious while speaking English during lessons share these misconceptions, and only experience symptoms that they do not view as being truly anxious. Nevertheless, future research can further investigate the different levels of anxiety between genders and the reasons behind higher amounts of anxiety among girls. The Table below shows how different genders perceive their oral English proficiency in comparison to their peers, how courageous they are to speak English during their free time and how they view their linguistic awareness.

TABLE 7 Perceived English proficiency, speaking courage and linguistic awareness among boys (n=23) and girls (n=27).

	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Cannot say (%)
Other students are better at speaking English than I am	26 63	31 11	30 22	13 4
I have the courage to speak English during my free time	79 70	13 19	4 11	4 0
I am less nervous when speaking English during my free time than when speaking during English lessons	39 71	31 7	30 15	0 7
I can tell what mistakes I make while speaking English	83 81	13 15	0 4	4 0
I wish that the teacher will help me correct the mistakes I make while speaking English	53 63	35 15	8 7	4 15

<b>I need time to think beforehand about what I am going to say before I can speak during English lessons</b>	<b>30</b> <b>66</b>	<b>22</b> <b>7</b>	<b>48</b> <b>23</b>	<b>0</b> <b>4</b>
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Table 7 shows that boys were rather divided on whether other students are better at speaking English than they are, as about a quarter (26%) agreed that other students were better, and almost a third (30%) disagreed with it. Almost a third (31%) did neither agree nor disagree and a few (13%) could not say. Girls, however, were quite critical of their own skills, since almost two thirds (63%) agreed that other students are better at speaking English than they are. Only a slightly over fifth (22%) disagreed with the statement. Like boys, a few (11%) did neither agree nor disagree, and even fewer (4%) could not say.

Girls are more critical about their own level of proficiency when compared to their classmates and consider others better at speaking English more often than boys. Liu and Jackson (2008) found that foreign language anxiety correlates with students' perceptions of their English language proficiency. Foreign language anxiety has been linked to students' reduced sense of self-worth and motivation in other researcher as well (e.g., Onwuegbuzie et al. 1999: 228, Liu & Huang 2011). These findings align with the notion that girls experience more foreign language anxiety than boys. Thus, girls may have false perceptions of their English language proficiency. This is backed up by the fact that both boys and girls shared almost the same average grade in English, it being 7.9 for boys and 8.0 for girls. Therefore, girls viewing their classmates as better English speakers cannot be explained by differences in skill. Rather, as shown above, girls experience more anxiety during foreign language lessons, which may distort their perception of their skill level.

With boys, the majority (79%) agreed with the statement "I have the courage to speak English during my free time." Only a few (8%) disagreed. Girls reported similar findings, with over two thirds (70%) agreeing with the same statement. Likewise, only a few (11%) disagreed. When given the statement "I am less nervous when speaking English during my free time than when speaking during English lessons," over a third of boys (39%) both agreed and slightly under a third (31%) disagreed. Over two thirds of girls (70%) agreed with the above-mentioned statement. Under a fifth (15%) disagreed.



Girls were particularly less anxious when speaking English during their free time rather than during lessons. Similar results have been achieved by Liu and Jackson (2008), who reported students feeling less anxious when speaking English during their free time rather than during English lessons. As discussed in chapter 4.1, speaking English during one's free time is believed to be a non-formal situation, which is less anxiety inducing than formal situations during school lessons (Woodrow, 2006). From boys, who reported being less anxious speaking English during lessons than girls, roughly an equal amount stated both that speaking English during their free time was either less anxiety inducing than during lessons or that it was not. Since boys were less anxious to begin with, they may not see as big of a difference between a classroom setting and free time setting as girls.

Both boys and girls seem to be aware of the mistakes they make while speaking English. The majority of both boys (83%) and girls (81%) stated that they were able to notice what kind of mistakes they make while speaking English. Only a few of both boys and girls (4%) believed that they were unable to notice any mistakes they made while speaking English. Having their English teacher help them correct their mistakes was preferred by both boys and girls. Over half of the boys (53%) agreed with the statement "I wish that the teacher will help me correct the mistakes I make while speaking English". Only a few (8%) disagreed, but over a third (35%) did neither agree nor disagree, and another few (4%) could not say. Almost two thirds of girls (63%) agreed with the above-mentioned statement. Only a few (7%) disagreed.

Almost a third of the boys (30%) agreed that they need time to think beforehand about what they are going to say before they can speak during English lessons. Around half of the boys (48%) disagreed with the statement. More girls needed time to think, as two thirds (66%) agreed about needing time, and only about a quarter (23%) reported not needing time to think beforehand.

### 4.3 Differences in perceived oral English anxiety between English grades

In this section, I divide the participants into two groups based on their reports of their latest English grade. 32 participants reported an English grade between 8-10, and 20 reported a grade between 5-7. Six participants did not want to share their grades or did not remember them and were therefore excluded from this analysis. Again, the participants are unevenly distributed among the groups, but the fairest distinction between grades could be made by deciding on

having the cut-off point being around grades 7 and 8. This is because no students reported having a 4 for a grade, and only six students reported having a grade of 5-6. However, 23 students reported having a grade of 7-8. Henceforth, those who reported a grade between 8-10 will be referred to as EG 8-10 (English grade 8-10) and those who reported a grade between 5-7 will be referred to as EG 5-7 (English grade 5-7). Nevertheless, the somewhat notable difference in the number of students between EG 5-7 and EG 8-10 must be kept in mind while discussing the results. Table 11 describes the participation during lessons between students with higher English grades and students with lower English grades.

TABLE 8 Participation during lessons between EG 8-10 (n=32) and EG 5-7 (n=20).

	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Cannot say (%)
I like discussion activities during English lessons	75 70	10 10	12 20	3 0
I like discussion activities during other lessons	43 75	19 15	38 10	0 0
Talking to a partner or in a small group is more enjoyable than having a conversation with the whole class overseen by the teacher	84 95	13 0	3 5	0 0
I voluntarily answer questions asked by the teacher during English lessons	37 45	41 20	19 25	3 10
I actively participate during English lessons by, for example, raising my hand	53 40	19 40	28 20	0 0
I actively participate during other than English lessons, by, for example, raising my hand	37 65	31 25	29 10	3 0

While looking at the English grades of the students in relation to foreign language anxiety in the table above, some interesting findings can be highlighted. First, both groups enjoyed

discussion activities during English lessons, with EG 5-7 having over two thirds of students (70%) and EG 8-10 three quarters of students (75%) stating that they enjoy having discussions during English lessons. EG 5-7 enjoyed conversational activities outside of English classes considerably more than EG 8-10; while three quarters of EG 5-7 (75%) stated that they enjoy conversational activities during other than English lessons, only under half of EG 8-10 (43%) reported the same.

EG 5-7 was seemingly more likely to answer teacher's questions during English lessons than EG 8-10. While almost half of EG 5-7 (45%) said that they often answer teacher's questions during English lessons voluntarily, EG 8-10 had only slightly over a third of students (37%) willingly answering teacher's questions. However, EG 5-7 also had a quarter of students (25%) stating that they do not voluntarily answer and a fifth (20%) either not agreeing or disagreeing. EG 8-10 had almost a fifth (19%) saying that they do not voluntarily answer and slightly over two fifths (41%) either not agreeing or disagreeing.

Contradicting the previous findings, EG 5-7, which was more likely to voluntarily answer teacher's questions than EG 8-10, participated less during English lessons by, for example, raising their hands than EG 8-10. Under half of EG 5-7 (40%) stated that they actively participate during English lessons, whereas over half of EG 8-10 (53%) stated the same. A fifth of EG 5-7 (20%) and almost a third of EG 8-10 (28%) said that they do not actively participate, and two fifths of EG 5-7 (40%) and almost a fifth of EG 8-10 (19%) neither agreed or disagreed that they actively participated. The roles are reversed when it comes to being active during other than English lessons; almost two thirds of EG 5-7 (65%) said that they were active during other lessons, whereas only over a third of EG 8-10 (37%) said the same. This may be since EG 5-7 may perform better during other lessons and are thus more confident in giving out an answer during those lessons, whereas they are unsure of their own level of proficiency in English. Liu and Huang (2011) found that higher motivation and better performance in English correlated with each other. It can be argued that same correlation can be found in other subjects as well, meaning that EG 5-7 may be more active during other lessons, since they perform better at those subjects and therefore also have a higher motivation. Table 12 shows the causes and effects of foreign language anxiety during English lessons between students with higher English grades and lower English grades.

TABLE 9 Foreign language anxiety during English lessons between EG 8-10 and EG 5-7.

	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Cannot say (%)
I am afraid of making mistakes while speaking English during English lessons	45 55	13 5	42 35	0 5
I am afraid that the teacher will ask me to answer out loud during English lessons	41 55	9 5	50 40	0 0
I am afraid that the teacher will point out the mistakes I make while speaking English	34 25	13 10	50 50	3 15
Even if I knew the answer to a question during English lesson, I do not answer because I am afraid of making mistakes while speaking	40 50	19 10	41 40	0 0
I am afraid that other students will judge me when I speak English in class	34 35	13 15	47 50	6 0

Expectedly, EG 8-10 was less anxious about speaking during English lessons, with under half of them (45%) being anxious about making mistakes, while EG 5-7 felt more anxious, with over half (55%) stating that they were anxious about making mistakes while speaking. Similarly, EG 5-7 was more anxious about the teacher asking them to answer out loud during a lesson with over half of the students (55%) sharing these feelings. Interestingly, two fifths (40%) reported that they were not anxious about having to answer a teacher's question. EG 8-10 only had slightly over two fifths of students (41%) feeling anxious about the possibility of having to answer a teacher's question, with half of the students (50%) stating that they were not anxious when having to answer out loud.

Both groups were close to equally worried about their teacher pointing out their mistakes while speaking English. A quarter of EG 5-7 (25%) and about a third of EG 8-10 (34%) were afraid

of getting their mistakes pointed out, while half (50%) of both EG 5-7 and EG 8-10 were not anxious about having their mistakes pointed out. Likewise, around a third of both EG 5-7 (35%) and EG 8-10 (34%) were anxious about being judged by their classmates while speaking English. Again, half of EG 5-7 (50%) and slightly under half of EG 8-10 (47%) were not anxious about how their classmates perceive them while speaking English. This indicates that the level of proficiency one has in speaking English might not actually impact how anxious students are about speaking English in class, since both EG 5-7 and EG 8-10 reported identical results about how anxious they were of being judged by their classmates. Some research (e.g., Anyadubalu, 2009) suggests that students with lower levels of English language anxiety score better in English tests than those with higher levels of English language anxiety. Even though EG 8-10 reported being slightly less anxious about making mistakes while speaking English during lessons and being less afraid of the teacher asking them to answer a question aloud than EG 5-7, these differences were not significant. As such, more research is needed to reassert above-mentioned findings.

EG 5-7 was also less likely to answer questions even if they believe they know the answer because they are afraid of making mistakes than EG 8-10; EG 5-7 had half of students (50%) refrained from answering, while EG 8-10 had under half (40%). Still, somewhat two fifths of EG 5-7 (40%) and slightly over two fifths of EG 8-10 (41%) did not let the possibility of making mistakes come between them and answering the teacher's questions. Table 13 shows students with higher English grades and students with lower English grades perceive their oral English proficiency in comparison to their peers, how courageous they are to speak English during their free time and how they view their linguistic awareness.

TABLE 10 Perceived English proficiency, speaking courage and linguistic awareness between EG 8-10 and EG 5-7.

	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Cannot say (%)
Other students are better at speaking English than I am	25 75	25 10	37 10	13 5
I have the courage to speak English during my free time	88 55	6 25	6 10	0 10
I am less nervous when speaking English during	53 45	16 20	22 25	9 10

my free time than when speaking during English lessons				
I can tell what mistakes I make while speaking English	88 70	3 25	6 0	3 5
I wish that the teacher will help me correct the mistakes I make while speaking English	56 60	32 20	9 10	3 10
I need time to think beforehand about what I am going to say before I can speak during English lessons	37 70	13 10	47 20	3 0

In table 13, a distinct difference between EG 5-7 and EG 8-10 could be noted when it comes to students' sense of their own speaking ability in comparison to that of their peers. Three quarters of EG 5-7 (75%) believe that their classmates are better at speaking English than they are, whereas only a quarter of EG 8-10 (25%) believe the same. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) have shown that prolonged foreign language anxiety may distort students' perceptions of their own language proficiency. Furthermore, students who are anxious about making mistakes while speaking English may become increasingly more anxious if the mistakes keep happening (Gregersen, 2003). Reducing students' foreign language anxiety is thus vital in ensuring that they have proper understanding of their English proficiency. However, while looking at the data, it cannot be stated for sure that EG 5-7 suffers from the above-mentioned EG 5-7 false presumptions. Studies (e.g., Onwuegbuzie et al., 1999) show students with lower levels of English proficiency indeed suffer more foreign language anxiety than those with higher levels of English proficiency. This anxiety may stem from simple reasons, such as the fear of making errors while speaking. One EG 5-7 student describes their foreign language anxiety while having to speak English as follows:

(9) “[My] hands start to shake and I am not able to say anything and there is no other way than just to skip over me if I cannot answer.” - Other gender identity, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 5-7

Not knowing or not being able to answer was a source of foreign language anxiety shared by many students. Obviously, this type of foreign language anxiety is more prevalent in students with lower levels of English language proficiency, as in EG 5-7.

Even though both groups were more likely to have the courage to speak English during their free time than not, EG 8-10 had a higher percentage of students reporting this. EG 5-7 had over half of students (55%) stating they have the courage to speak English during their free time, and only a few (10%) who do not dare to speak English during their free time. EG 8-10 on the other hand had the majority of students (88%) stating that they have the courage to speak English during their free time and only a few (6%) stated that they do not dare to speak English during their free time. Since EG 8-10 has higher English grades than EG 5-7, they might be more courageous when it comes to speaking English during their free time because they possess a higher level of English proficiency.

However, both groups seemingly agreed that they are less nervous when speaking English during their free time; slightly under half of EG 5-7 (45%) and slightly over half of EG 8-10 (53%) reported these findings. A quarter of EG 5-7 (25%) and around fifth of EG 8-10 (22%) did not feel like speaking English during their free time made them less nervous than speaking it during English lessons. The reactions from other classmates are often anxiety inducing. An EG 5-7 student states that

(10) "Talking to a partner is the most pleasant, because then it does not matter even if you do not know and they can always help. My least favorite is speaking while the whole class is listening, because I am afraid that they will start to laugh or something like that, if you are not that good." - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 5-7

Similar situations as talking with a partner can possibly be expected while speaking during one's free time. It is also less likely that there is a similar crowd as in a classroom that could start laughing if one makes a mistake.

Both groups could also tell what mistakes they make while speaking English. EG 5-7 had over two thirds of students (70%) who believe that they can notice their own mistakes and only a few students (5%) who believe that they cannot notice what mistakes they make while speaking English. EG 8-10 had an overwhelming majority of students (88%) who believe that they can

notice their own mistakes and only a few students (6%) who believe that they cannot. Teacher's help in correcting students' speaking mistakes was also appreciated by both groups; almost two thirds of EG 5-7 (60%) and over half of EG 8-10 (56%) wished that their teacher would help them correct their speaking mistakes. Only some EG 5-7 students (10%) and EG 8-10 students (9%) wished that the teacher would not help them correct their mistakes.

Needing time before being able to speak in English was more common in EG 5-7 than in EG 8-10; over two thirds of EG 5-7 (70%) reported that they need some time to think about what they are going to say before they can speak in English, whereas EG 8-10 only had a over third (37%) feeling the same. It could be that EG 8-10 is more fluent in English and therefore is better prepared to answer questions even abruptly, whereas EG 5-7 requires more time to form an answer in their head before being able to say it aloud.

#### 4.4 Students' suggestion to make speaking English even more enjoyable during English lessons

The participants in this study were reticent to suggest means of making speaking during English lessons more enjoyable, or pessimistic whether it is possible, as almost two thirds of them (63%), stated that either "they do not know" or "there is nothing that can be done." Unfortunately, the open-ended questions did not yield as many responses as the research questions had hoped. Still, these questions offered deeper insight than the statements alone.

Those students who had suggestions for a more enjoyable speaking experience shared similar ideas. The most popular ideas were letting students choose a partner to talk to, giving students the option to choose whether they want to talk or not, complimenting and encouraging students, having an atmosphere where other students or the teacher would not make fun of students for making mistakes, only asking from those who do raise their hand, and having more games, such as Kahoot.

Choosing a partner to talk during discussion activities was proposed by multiple students. By being able to choose one's own partner or group, students are less anxious while speaking and are also less anxious about making mistakes. The fear of having other students ridicule them or laugh at them is also smaller. The idea of choosing one's partner was explained by some students as follows:



(11) “Choose based on students wishes, for example, what type of groups to talk in.” - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

(12) “If one could talk more with for example friends (when failing is not scary) then maybe talking to a bigger group would also be easier.” - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

By having the option to choose whether they want to answer or not, some of the anxiety students experience can be alleviated. Having to answer teacher’s questions unwillingly caused a lot of anxiety among students, especially if students felt that they did not know the correct answer. Students stated that:

(13) “If someone does not want to talk in front of the whole class then don’t pressure to do that.” - Girl, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

(14) “So that they [the teacher] would not be like, well, you give me an answer but so that you could decide to answer if you wanted to. Because that is the most anxious situation and then you usually screw up by thinking too much.” - Girl, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

Being forced to answer questions unwillingly made students anxious. The possibility of having to answer aloud was also enough to induce anxiety. Students hoped that their teacher would compliment and encourage them. Having a positive attitude towards teaching and encouraging students has proven to alleviate some foreign language anxiety among students (Gregersen, 2003). The requests for encouragement were worded as, for example, as follows:

(15) “Encourage and scold if someone for example laughs at another” - Girl, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

However, one student felt that the role of a teacher in reducing anxiety was rather insignificant. The actions of a teacher were not seen as important as the student's own courage to speak. The student in question describes their feelings as follows:

(16) “I actually cannot really tell. It is more about one’s own courage rather than what a teacher could do. At least that is how I feel.” - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

It therefore appears that some students believe that only their own attitude dictates how enjoyable speaking English in a classroom is, rather than the effort of their teacher. It is possible that the amount of anxiety in some students is so high, that even the teacher's best efforts fail in alleviating their anxiety. In some instances, the ways in which the teacher tries to reduce anxiety may also be ineffective or poorly executed.

A positive atmosphere, where neither students nor teachers would make fun of others was also seen as a way to reduce anxiety. As discussed in chapter 4.1, the fear of being ridiculed by others caused anxiety in students. An encouraging atmosphere was thus seen as an effective way to incite more speaking during lessons, with students being less anxious about making mistakes. This is seen in a comment of a student, who says:

(17) "If the atmosphere in class was more encouraging then one would not have to be afraid of others' reactions or failure." - Girl, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

Some students also wished for more games to be had during English lessons. Having something "fun" to do was seen as a way to make speaking English even more enjoyable and alleviate anxiety. One student describes their proposition as follows:

(18) "Common fun activity for example a game that uses English language" - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

Increasing one's level of English proficiency was the most common answer when asked how students themselves could make speaking English even more enjoyable during English lessons. Other suggestions were to practice more, be more confident, and to not judge others when they speak. Somewhat under half of the students did not know how they could make speaking English more enjoyable.

Being better at English was viewed as a way to reduce anxiety by many students. This notion is backed up by a multitude of research, such as Liu and Jackson (2008), Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999) and Liu and Huang (2011). Higher levels of English proficiency give students more courage to speak the language and participate in discussion activities. This is shown by students who comment that speaking English during lessons would be more enjoyable if they:

(19) “Would be better at English” - Girl, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 5-7

(20) “Study to speak English even better” - Boy, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

(21) “Develop my own linguistic abilities, so that speaking would be better” - Boy, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 5-7

Many students also believed that practicing more would make speaking English during lessons more enjoyable and less anxiety inducing. Additionally, having more confidence and being less judgmental of others were also seen as a way to reduce anxiety. Comments regarding these viewpoints were rather straightforward.

(22) “Practice and learn” - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 5-7

(23) “Be more confident about my own abilities and more encouraging towards others” - Girl, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

(24) “Help others and not care about the mistakes of others.” - Girl, 9<sup>th</sup> grade, EG 8-10

When asked what other students could do to make speaking English even more enjoyable during English lessons, almost half of the students could not give an answer. The most suggested idea was for other students to be more supportive, create a positive atmosphere and not judge others for their mistakes. These ideas were present in other suggestions as well. Other ideas were to be silent while others are speaking, be more active, and focus on their own learning.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at researching how oral English language anxiety is experienced by junior high school students. The study particularly considered the differences in oral English language anxiety among different genders and students with different grades in English, as well as sought suggestions from students to reduce foreign language anxiety during English lessons.

Overall, students enjoyed discussion activities during both English lessons and other lessons but preferred them more during English lessons. This indicates that students are interested in speaking to one another during lessons and generally view oral activities as enjoyable, and do not distance themselves from these activities even when they are in English. Oral English language anxiety was most often experienced in situations where students had other students listening to them, for example, during a class-wide conversation. The anxiety present in these situations stems from the fear of being judged by others, either by getting laughed at or getting comments on the mistakes. Conversely, students felt less anxious when talking within a small group of students or with a partner, since the pressure of making mistakes was lowered and the fear of being made fun of was lessened. Foreign language anxiety was also present in situations where students did not have enough time to think. Such situations were, for example, having to involuntarily answer a teacher's questions aloud. Similar findings have been shown in previous research as well (e.g., Woodrow 2006). However, students were generally not anxious about being corrected by their teacher while speaking English and hoped that the teacher would help them correct said mistakes. The teacher was therefore not seen as a source of anxiety per se, but rather some of their practices could cause anxiety in students. Still, research, such as von Wörde (2003) and Marwan (2007), highlight that a teacher can reduce foreign language anxiety in students with an understanding and caring approach. Indeed, some students explicitly stated that they are less anxious during English lessons specifically because of their teacher.

A few notable differences in oral English language anxiety between boys and girls can be seen. Boys were more active during English lessons and other lessons than girls and voluntarily answered teacher's questions more often than girls. Since boys were more active during other than English lessons as well, it cannot be stated that having to speak English during lessons is the only reason for girls participating less during English lessons. Regardless, girls might

experience more foreign language anxiety than boys and therefore participate less during lessons. However, boys seemed to be overall more active during school than girls, and said activity was present in multiple subjects. Still, more girls reported feeling less anxious when speaking English during their free time than boys, which might indicate that foreign language anxiety among the girls might be tied to a classroom setting. It must be noted that while more girls reported feeling less anxious when speaking English during their free time than boys, this does not necessarily mean that girls feel less nervous when speaking English during their free time than boys. Rather, it might be that boys do not see a clear distinction between speaking in school and during their free time and consider both situations to be as nervous, which might explain why boys were less anxious about making mistakes while speaking English than girls. However, boys shared almost the same average English grade (7.9) as girls (8.0). Therefore, boys were not less anxious about making mistakes because of their grades, but for other reasons. Studies, such as Khesht-Masjedi et al. (2019), have shown that female teenagers showcase higher levels of anxiety than male teenagers. Furthermore, boys were seemingly unconcerned about being judged by their classmates while speaking English, whereas girls were a lot more likely to worry about their peers' opinions. One reason for this might be that girls believe that they are worse at speaking English than their classmates more often than boys. It appears that boys have a higher level of confidence in their own speaking skills and are less likely to be concerned about how others view them while they are speaking than girls.

The differences in English grades also featured interesting findings. The biggest disparity between students with lower English grades and students with higher English grades was seen when analysing how students viewed their own levels of spoken English when compared to that of their classmates. While three quarters of students with lower English grades believed that they are worse at speaking English than their classmates, only a quarter of students with higher English grades felt the same. Students who have lower English grades thus believe increasingly less in their own speaking abilities than those who have better English grades. Previous studies (e.g., Liu & Jackson 2008) have shown a correlation between foreign language anxiety and lessened perception of language proficiency in students. It might be that students automatically associate lower grades with lower speaking abilities as well. The idea of others being better at speaking English is also seen when it comes to speaking English during one's free time. Vast majority of students with higher English grades stated that they have the courage to speak English in their free time, whereas only about half of students with lower English grades had the same courage. It appears that being confident in one's own speaking skills is

not only limited to a classroom setting, but rather carries out to students' personal lives, too. Likewise, students with lower English grades also reported needing time to think before being able to speak in English twice as often as students with higher English grades. Onwuegbuzie et al. (1999: 228) argue that foreign language anxiety decreases students' perceived self-worth and scholastic competence, consequently reducing their motivation and effort. This may explain why in the present study, students with lower English grades were less courageous to speak English during their free time than students with higher English grades. Students with lower English grades may have the perception of their competence in English lowered. As such, how confident students are in their ability to speak English may translate into how eager they are to use it in the first place. On the contrary, students with lower English grades were much more enthusiastic about discussion activities during other than English lessons. It may be that being able to converse in one's mother tongue alleviates the anxiety that speaking in English has, thus making the discussion activities more enjoyable for them. Indeed, students with lower English grades were slightly more anxious about making mistakes while speaking English or getting called out to answer a teacher's question than students with higher English grades. Interestingly, both students with lower English grades and students with higher English grades shared similar levels of anxiety about being judged by their classmates. It thus seems that one's English grade is not a major factor that affects the level of anxiety a student has of being judged by their classmates.

Unfortunately, students were quite reticent when asked to give suggestions to make speaking English even more enjoyable and less anxiety-inducing during lessons. Only some students gave suggestions in the open-ended questions for making speaking English even more enjoyable during English lessons. The majority of students offered no suggestions. It could be that junior high school students still lack the critical thinking capabilities required to assess a situation as difficult as this one. Even though the question touches their very lives, they might have difficulties coming up with solutions. Moreover, some students might feel that it is out of their control regardless, and thus proposing ideas is not even worth the effort. It could also be that the situation is so complex that coming up with solutions is too demanding. Also, students had limited time to answer the questionnaire, which puts extra pressure on them and leaves less time for creative and profound thinking. It is therefore too harsh to criticise them for not providing the "perfect answers." On the contrary, many students were able to provide thoughtful and functional suggestions to ease the anxiety they face while speaking English.

The suggestions given include being able to pick one's discussion partner, being able to choose whether they want to participate in the discussion or not, having more games, and only asking questions from those who are visibly willing to answer. Furthermore, a pleasant and encouraging atmosphere was raised as an effective way to ease anxiety. Both the teacher and other students should be kind to one another and refrain from judging or mocking others for the way they speak in any form, such as by laughing. Students also hoped that their teacher would compliment them when they perform well. Students also believe that practising English and thus becoming more fluent would make them less nervous while speaking English. Being more confident and taking mistake-making less seriously was also seen as a good way to help with anxiety.

The present study showed that anxiety clearly affects how well students perform in English. Even though most of the students reported that being anxious had not affected their performance in English, around a quarter of students professed that anxiety had affected their performance in English, with a single student explicitly stating that anxiety had made studying English harder. Another student stated that anxiety had improved their test scores.

The present study features only a small sample size of data, and the answers obtained may be the characteristics of the singular junior high school used in the present study. More thorough and far-reaching results can be obtained with a larger scale study, including more junior high schools and more students. Furthermore, the data acquired is tied to a Finnish learning and teaching context and may not be directly applicable to other countries or school grades. Regardless, these findings showcase the effects of foreign language anxiety, especially that of spoken English during English lessons, and how it is perceived by Finnish junior high school students. More research is needed to see whether these findings can be replicated not only in a Finnish context but in other countries and settings as well. For future research, I suggest investigating the differences between genders regarding perceived oral English anxiety in more detail, since the present study observed a significant difference between the amount of anxiety perceived between boys and girls. In addition, searching for more precise means for increasing students' self-confidence, especially among those students with weaker English grades, and discovering tangible ways to alleviate anxiety during English lessons seems compelling.





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## APPENDICES

### 1. The questionnaire:

Taustatiedot: luokka-aste (7, 8, 9), sukupuoli (poika, tyttö, muu), viimeisin englannin arvosana (4–10)

Täysin samaa mieltä - Jonkin verran samaa mieltä - Ei eri mieltä eikä samaa mieltä - Jonkin verran eri mieltä - Täysin eri mieltä - En osaa sanoa -skaalan väittämät:

1. Pidän keskustelutehtävistä englannin tunneilla.
2. Minua jännittää tehdä virheitä puhuessani englantia englannin kielen tunnilla.
3. Minua jännittää, että opettaja pyytää minua vastaamaan ääneen englannin tunnilla.
4. Pidän keskustelutehtävistä muiden oppiaineiden tunneilla (esim. biologia, äidinkieli, jne.).
5. Pareittain tai ryhmässä keskustelu on mukavampaa, kuin koko luokan kanssa käytävä keskustelu opettajan johdolla.
6. Vastaan usein englannin tunnilla englannin opettajan esittämiin kysymyksiin vapaaehtoisesti.
7. Osallistun aktiivisesti opetukseen englannin oppitunneilla, esim. Viittaamalla.
8. Osallistun aktiivisesti opetukseen muiden oppiaineiden tunneilla, esim. Viittaamalla.
9. Pelkään, että opettaja huomauttaa virheistä, joita teen puhuessani englantia.
10. Pelkään, että muut oppilaat arvostelevat minua, kun puhun englantia luokassa.
11. Muut oppilaat ovat taitavampia englannin puhumisessa kuin minä.
12. Vaikka tietäisin vastauksen johonkin kysymykseen englannin tunnilla, en vastaa, koska pelkään tekeväni virheitä puhuessani englantia.
13. Tarvitsen aikaa miettiä etukäteen, mitä aion sanoa englanniksi, ennen kuin voin puhua englantia oppitunneilla.
14. Etäopetuksessa englannin puhuminen oppitunneilla oli mukavampaa, kuin tavallisten englannin oppituntien aikana.
15. Uskallan puhua englanniksi vapaa-ajallani.
16. Minua jännittää vähemmän puhua englantia vapaa-ajallani kuin englannin oppitunneilla.
17. Huomaan itse, mitä virheitä minulle sattuu puhuessani englantia.
18. Toivon, että opettaja auttaa minua korjaamaan virheitä, joita minulle tulee puhuessani englantia.

Avoimet kysymykset:

19. Jännittääkö sinua puhua englantia oppitunneilla? Miten jännitys ilmenee (esim. hikoilu, äänen värinä, keskittymisvaikeudet jne.) ja miten sitä voisi helpottaa?
20. Vertaile englannin puhumista seuraavissa tilanteissa ja pohdi, mitkä tilanteet ovat sinulle mieluisimpia, ja mistä pidät vähiten? Minkä vuoksi?:
  - Puhuminen kahdestaan parin kanssa
  - Puhuminen pienessä ryhmässä
  - Puhuminen koko luokan kuullen
  - Puhuminen kahden kesken opettajan kanssa
21. Oletko huomannut, että muita jännittää puhua englantia englannin tunneilla?

22. Kuvaille kolmella sanalla, minkälaista sinun mielestäsi on puhua englantia englannin oppitunneilla.
23. Mitä opettaja voisi tehdä, jotta englannin puhuminen englannin oppitunneilla olisi vielä miellyttävämpää?
24. Mitä voisit itse tehdä, jotta englannin puhuminen englannin oppitunneilla olisi vielä miellyttävämpää?
25. Mitä muut oppilaat voivat tehdä, jotta englannin puhuminen englannin oppitunneilla olisi vielä miellyttävämpää?
26. Mitä muita keinoja keksit, joiden avulla englannin puhuminen englannin oppitunneilla olisi vielä miellyttävämpää?
27. Onko englannin tunneilla jännittäminen vaikuttanut siihen, miten hyvin suoriudut englannin opiskelussa?

## 2. Citations:

- (1) "No et se ei kyselis sillee et sanoppa nyt sinä tuo vaan et sais vastaa itte jos haluis. Koska se on se kaikista ahistavin tilanne ja silloin yleensä mokaa kun liikaa ajattelee."
- (2) "Ei koska [opettajan nimi] on best<3 mutta muiden opettajien kanssa kyllä."
- (3) "Ei naura kellekään tai kommentoi toisten ääntämistä."
- (4) "Heidän ei ainakaan pitäisi tuomita ketään tai nauraa, jos jollakin menee väärin."
- (5) "Olla itsevarmempi omista taidoistani ja kannustavampi muiden suhteen."
- (6) "[M]inua jännittää puhua englantia oppitunneilla ja jännityksen ilmenee ehkä sillä että katselen paljon ympärilläni tai vain pulpettiin ja jalkani tärisee"
- (7) "Jännittää vähäsen, alan panikoimaan että osaanko. Helpottaisi puhua saman kaltaisen oppilaan kanssa joka osaa puhua englantia samanlailla kuin itse."
- (8) "Minua jännittää jonkin verran, mutta vain välillä. Pelkään, että vastaan väärin, ja tämän takia jätän aika usein vastaamatta. En kuitenkaan esimerkiksi hikoile tai ääneni ei värise, eli en koe jännittäväni "kunnolla".
- (9) "Kädet alkaa tärinä enkä saa sanottua mitään ja ei siihen oo mitään muuta keinoa kun jättää mut välistä jos en pysty vastaamaan."
- (10) "Puhuminen kahdestaan parin kanssa on mieluisin, koska silloin ei haittaa, vaikka et osaa ja ne auttaa aina. Vähiten pidän koko luokan kuullen, koska pelottaa et ne alkaa nauraa tai jotain semmosta, jos ei osaa kunnolla."
- (11) "Valita oppilaiden toiveiden mukaan esim. Millaisissa porukoissa puhutaan."
- (12) "Jos saisi enemmän puhua vaikka kavereiden kanssa(jolloin ei oikeastaan pelota epäonnistua), niin ehkä myös isommalle joukolle puhuminen olisi helpompaa."
- (13) "jos joku ei halua puhua koko luokan eessä nii ei painosta siihen."

(14) “No et se ei kyselis sillee et sanoppa nyt sinä tuo vaan et sais vastaa itte jos haluis. Koska se on se kaikista ahistavin tilanne ja silloin yleensä mokaa kun liikaa ajattelee.”

(15) “Kannustaa ja torua jos joku vaikka nauraa toiselle”

(16) “En oikeastaan osaa sanoa. Se on enemmän kiinni omasta uskaltamisesta kuin siitä, mitä opettaja voisi tehdä. Ainakin itselläni on sellainen olo.”

(17) “Jos luokkailmapiiri olisi kannustavampi ei tarvitsisi pelätä muiden reaktioita tai epäonnistumista.”

(18) “Yhteinen kiva tekeminen esim peli jossa käytetään englannin kieltä”

(19) “Osas paremmin englantia”

(20) “Opetella puhumaan englantia vielä paremmin”

(21) “Kehittää omaa kielikorvaa, jotta puhuminen olisi parempaa.”

(22) “Harjotella ja opetella”

(23) “Olla itsevarmempi omista taidoistani ja kannustavampi muiden suhteen.”

(24) “Auttaa muita ja olla välittämättä muiden virheistä.”