TEACHING AND LEARNING ORAL SKILLS IN FINNISH UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL:

A study of students' and teachers'views on oral skills education

Master's thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Suullisen kielitaidon opetusta sekä sen asemaa lukion englannin kielen opinnoissa on tutkittu enimmäkseen opettajien näkökulmasta. Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus oli tutkia, millaisten harjoitusten kautta suullista kielitaitoa opetetaan ja opetellaan lukioissa, sekä millaiset suulliset harjoitukset opiskelijat ja opettajat kokevat mieluisimmiksi ja hyödyllisimmiksi oppimisen kannalta. Lisäksi tässä tutkimuksessa selvitettiin, millainen status suullisella kielitaidolla nykyään on lukion englannin kielen opinnoissa, ja keskitytäänkö suullisen kielitaidon opettamiseen tarpeeksi.

Tutkimuksen kohderyhmänä olivat englannin kielen lukio-opettajat sekä toisen vuositason opiskelijat Keski-Suomen ja Itä-Suomen alueella. Aineisto kerättiin käyttäen kahta kyselylomaketta, joista toinen oli suunnattu opettajille ja toinen opiskelijoille. Opettajien kyselylomakkeessa oli yhdeksän kysymystä liittyen tunneilla käytettäviin suullisiin tehtäviin, suullisen kielitaidon opettamiseen liittyviin haasteisiin sekä suullisen kielitaidon nykyiseen asemaan kielten opetuksessa. Opiskelijoiden kyselylomake sisälsi kymmenen kysymystä, joissa kysyttiin niin ikään tunneilla käytettävistä harjoituksista, mutta myös seikoista, jotka saisivat opiskelijat harjoittelemaan puhumista enemmän, kehitysehdotuksista suullisten harjoitusten suhteen, ja suullisen kielitaidon painottamisesta lukio-opinnoissa.

Opiskelijat ja opettajat olivat yhtä mieltä siitä, että keskusteluharjoitukset nuorille ajankohtaisista sekä tärkeistä aiheista ovat mieluisin ja toisaalta myös hyödyllisin suullinen harjoitus. Lisäksi selvisi, että opettajat suosivat keskusteluharjoituksia myös määrällisesti muihin harjoitustyyppeihin nähden. Epämiellyttävimmiksi ja hyödyttömimmiksi harjoituksiksi opiskelijat kokivat esitelmät, joita opettajatkin antoivat opiskelijoilleen tehtäväksi vähiten. Opiskelijat olivat tyytyväisiä suullisten harjoitusten monipuolisuuteen, mutta halusivat niiden keskittyvän itselleen mielenkiintoisempiin aiheisiin, sekä tarvitsivat enemmän ääntämisharjoituksia. Opiskelijat myös kokivat, että suullista kielitaitoa painotetaan riittävästi lukiossa. Opettajat olivat suullisen kielitaidon asemaan suhteellisen tyytyväisiä, mutta pitivät ongelmallisena mm. ylioppilaskirjoitusten keskittymistä kirjalliseen tuottamiseen, mikä puolestaan vaikutti negatiivisesti opiskelijoiden motivaatioon harjoitella suullista osaamista.

Lisätutkimukseen olisi aihetta mm. suuremmalla määrällä tutkimukseen osallistuvia opettajia sekä opiskelijoita, ja maantieteellisesti laajemmalta alueelta kerättävällä tutkimusaineistolla. Lisäksi olisi hyvä syventää tutkimusta opiskelijoiden mielipiteistä liittyen suullisten harjoitusten aiheisiin, jotka he kokevat mielenkiintoisiksi. Myös suullisen kielitaidon asemaa korottavia toimenpiteitä olisi hyödyllistä tutkia.

Asiasanat – Keywords oral skills, speaking skills, communicative competence, oral proficiency, communicative proficiency, interaction
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1 INTRODUCTION

Oral skills as a part of communicative language competence have steadily gained importance in modern teaching. Teachers nowadays give greater value to speaking as opposed to earlier when written language production and grammar knowledge were clearly emphasized over spoken production. Moreover, it is commonly acknowledged nowadays that speaking does not constitute of merely knowing the sounds of a language. Instead, it is known that successful communication consists of verbal activity as well as non-verbal interaction (Hellgren 1982: 52-53).

Oral skills are also a vastly researched area of language competence. However, studies aimed at finding out how English oral skills are being taught in Finnish upper secondary schools, how they should be taught, and what their status actually is in classrooms concentrate on teachers' views of the subject, neglecting students' opinions. Previous studies such as conducted by Huuskonen and Kähkönen (2006), and by Tattari (2001) aimed at finding out how oral skills are practised, tested and evaluated, and what are the teachers' opinions on the subject. Therefore, there is a need for involving the upper secondary school students in the subject as well.

This study set to find out which types of oral exercises are used to practise speaking in English lessons, and how students and teachers feel about the current teaching methods, and which exercises they prefer. Furthermore, the status of oral skills in English language teaching, and students' as well as teachers' opinions on it were studied. The data of the study consists of 84 answered questionnaires by students and four answered questionnaires by teachers. The questionnaire for students had ten questions, and the questionnaire for teachers nine questions. The data were analyzed qualitatively, and the questionnaire results were divided into themes according to the topics of the questions. The contents of the answers were roughly categorized and counted. The presentation of the data is descriptive. Some of the data is presented in percentages and frequencies. The results revealed that the students prefer discussion exercises, and that they also consider them to be the most useful in terms of developing their speaking skills in English. Furthermore, the teachers favoured discussion exercises as well, and agreed with the students' view of them being the most beneficial for learning to speak better.

This study is constructed the following way. Chapter 2 will firstly discuss the definitions of speaking. Secondly, it will have a look at the Common European Framework for Languages, and the requirements which it and the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education provide for communicative language competence. Thirdly, it will discuss previous studies on the subject, and finally the practice of teaching oral skills. Aims, data and the methods of the study will be introduced in chapter 4. Chapter 5 will present the results of the study. Chapter 6 discusses the findings, concludes the study and also presents the pros and cons of the study. Suggestions for further research are also given in chapter 6.

2 SPEAKING – HOW IT IS DEFINED AND EVALUATED

Speaking is linguistically an extensive term and, accordingly, there are various ways to define it. In linguistics speaking is referred to with such terms as *oral skills*, *oral proficiency*, *communicative competence*, *communicative proficiency* and *interaction*, to name but a few. Speaking can be noted as a purely technical action in which sounds are produced to express words which in turn make larger entities when put next to each other. However, it is by no means enough to look at speaking simply from a technical viewpoint. In this chapter I shall firstly present some different definitions of speaking, including the communicational and interactional view of oral skills, which is used in this study. Secondly, I will discuss the Common European Framework for second language speaking requirements, in addition to the ones presented by the Ministry of Education and the syllabus concerning upper secondary schools. Thirdly, I will draw focus to some previous studies on the same field. Finally, I will have a look at teaching practices related to oral skills.

2.1 Definitions of speaking

Speech consists of idea units, which are typically either short phrases or clauses connected with such conjunctions as *and*, *or*, *but* or *that*. It is also possible that these idea units are simply spoken next to each other without conjunctions, with a possible short pause between them. The grammar of spoken language is simpler than that of the written language, since spoken language has to be understood in real time, and within the capacity of the speaker's and the listener's working memory (Luoma 2004: 12). In my opinion, Luoma's (2004: 12) view on speaking is a good start for defining speaking, since it describes the very smallest, technical parts of it. However, it is by no means enough to leave the definition at this level, since speaking and communication as we know them are not simply processes of putting words next to each other.

Bygate (1987: 3) points out that fluent speaking and communication cannot be achieved merely by knowing the technical side of speaking. Naturally, one needs to know the vocabulary and grammar structures of a language to be able to speak, but one also has to learn the skill to use that technical knowledge correctly in order to communicate the

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right meanings at the right time. Bygate (1987: 5-7) views speaking as a combination of motor-perceptive skills, and interaction skills. Motor-perceptive skills include perceiving, recalling and articulating sounds and structures of a language in the correct order. They enable one to master the superficial aspect of speaking. However, to be able to communicate and convey correct meanings, one needs to have interaction skills as well. Basically, interaction is the skill of using linguistic knowledge and motor-perceptive skills together to communicate with others. Through interaction skills one can control their own language production and make their own choices as they speak. Interaction skills include an aspect of being able to make decisions about communication, meaning what to say and how, and whether one needs to develop what they are saying, while still keeping in mind one's intentions and the relations one wishes to maintain with others. In addition, being able to use language to satisfy one's demands is an important part of interaction skills. It is worth noting that one also has to be capable of negotiating meanings with other speakers (Bitchener 2004: 81). Negotiated interaction occurs when the participants of a conversation need to modify and adjust what they are saying in order to be understood. In negotiated interaction the speech participants try to reach a mutual understanding. "To resolve the communication difficulty, participants may engage in a simple sequence of moves comprising the utterance that triggered the difficulty- -" (Bitchener 2004: 81).

The interactional aspect of speaking is emphasized by Hellgren (1982) as well. He uses the term 'oracy' for oral communicative proficiency, and by 'oracy' he means the ability to express oneself fluently in speech (Hellgren 1982: 55). Expressing oneself fluently in speech naturally requires knowledge of such aspects of language as grammar, vocabulary, and the rules of pronunciation (Salo-Lee 1991: 18). However, speaking and oral skills cannot be seen as separate from other aspects of language. In fact, they are closely connected to other language levels. Hellgren (1982: 52-53) points out that successful communication consists of verbal activity as well as non-verbal interaction which go hand in hand. Speaking cannot be fully understood without taking into account interaction, and non-verbal communication. Hellgren (1982: 52-53) discusses speaking and interaction while pointing out the embedded non-verbal communication as well.

> As a communicative activity speaking is usually face-toface interaction, constituting part of the conversation or dialogue. Thus what is said depends on what else has been said in the interaction. Consequently, speaking is part of the exchange of words which consists of receiving and producing. In interaction speaking is accompanied by gestures, facial expressions, and as a matter of fact, the utilization of the whole body (Hellgren 1982: 52-53).

My research is based on a communicational and interactional view of speaking and oral skills, combined from Hellgren's (1982), Bygate's (1987) and Bitchener's (2004) theories. I ground my thesis on their definitions of speaking, since they are more modern and more in accordance with today's oral teaching practice. I feel that oral skills are part of a wider concept of communication, and that they cannot be separated from it. Expressing oneself in speech undoubtedly requires a person to know the technical aspects of language, e.g. grammar. However, fluent speaking and conveying meanings in a successful and understandable manner also requires a person to be able to follow the etiquette of conversation and communication in general. One needs to be able to, for example, take turns in speech and settle their speech to fit the place and situation of the conversation. In addition, one has to be able to back up their speech with suitable non-verbal communication, since otherwise they could easily be misunderstood or even unintentionally offend the listener, leading to a total failure of conveying the intended meanings.

2.2 The Common European Framework – what it means, and how it defines communicative language competence

The Common European Framework (CEF) is a manual for language learning and teaching in the European Union, provided by the Council of Europe. It sets a guideline for language syllabuses, curricula, examinations and teaching material for schools in the countries of the European Union. The framework describes in an understandable manner what language learners need to learn, and which skills they need to develop in order to communicate effectively in a particular language, while covering also the cultural context in which the language is set. Furthermore, CEF provides people who assess learners' progress, e.g. language teachers, with defined levels of proficiency which help measure the learners' progress at each state of learning and on a life-long basis. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 1)

The Common European Framework was designed also to help language professionals overcome barriers of communication caused by the different educational systems in Europe. It provides means for language professionals to reflect on their work, and to ensure that they cater to the real needs of language learners. CEF aims at enhancing international co-operation in the field of languages and the transparency of courses, syllabuses and qualifications by providing a common basis for the description of objectives, content and methods. The objective language proficiency descriptions provided by the Framework contribute to mutual recognition of qualifications achieved in different learning contexts, which accordingly benefits the European mobility. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 1)

The Framework recognizes the complex nature of human language and communication but in order to handle such a great matter it divides language competence into separate components (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 1). According to the CEF (2012: 13), communicative language competence consists of *linguistic*, *sociolinguistic* and *pragmatic* components. By *linguistic competences* the CEF means lexical, phonological and syntactical knowledge and skills and other aspects of language as a system. In other words, the linguistic competence component relates to the range and quality of knowledge one has (e.g. the extent and precision of vocabulary). However, it also relates to cognitive organization and storing of that knowledge (e.g. the associations one makes when memorizing a lexical item), and to its later accessibility from one's mind.

Sociolinguistic competences refer to the sociocultural conditions with which language use is always tightly connected, and it can be said that all language communication is strictly affected by the sociolinguistic component. However, often people from different cultural backgrounds are unaware of its influence while engaged in a conversation. In addition to the mechanical language knowledge, e.g. grammar and vocabulary, the sociolinguistic competences require people to consider, for example, the rules of politeness, the difference between sexes and generations as well as social classes and groups in their speech. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 13)

The functional use of linguistic resources are referred to as *pragmatic competences* by the CEF. In other words, the pragmatic competences are concerned with, for example,

the production of language functions and speech acts such as giving instructions or asking questions, to name but a few. In addition, the pragmatic competences are heavily tied to textual knowledge as they require the mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence as well as the identification of text types and forms. It is also pointed out that the cultural environments affect crucially the construction of pragmatic abilities, since every culture has its own distinctive norms on speech acts and different types of texts. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 13)

2.3 Common reference levels provided by the Common European Framework

The Common European Framework includes common reference levels of language learning which teachers and students can refer to when assessing the learning process. The common reference levels were compiled to unify language teaching practices and evaluation methods in Europe. Accordingly, people in different European countries know better what type of language proficiency is expected from them, for example when applying to a foreign school. Therefore, the Common European Framework and the common reference levels contribute to increasing the mobility of people in Europe.

The different aspects of language use that are studied and evaluated at school have been divided by the CEF into understanding, speaking and writing. Understanding involves listening and reading skills. Speaking consists of spoken interaction and spoken production skills of which spoken interaction refers to conversational skills, while spoken production refers to the more technical side of speaking, e.g. phrase and sentence formulation. Writing simply refers to writing skills. In addition, the CEF has provided the European schools with a particular assessment grid for evaluating the qualitative aspects of spoken language use. The aspects of spoken language taken into account by the CEF in the grid are the range, accuracy, fluency and coherence of speech as well as interaction. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 26-29)

The CEF divides the language users into three broad levels: *A*, *B* and *C*. Level *A* stands for basic user, level *B* for independent user and level *C* for proficient user of language. These three broad levels are further subcategorized as *A1*, *A2*, *B1*, *B2*, *C1* and *C2* levels. For each of these six learner levels the CEF has defined an appropriate level of language competence in the different language aspects mentioned above. In other words, for

example a B1 learner is expected to master certain aspects of speaking in order to be in the level B1. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 23)

Oftentimes the common reference levels provided by the CEF are not applied as such in the actual school world. However, in many cases they do form the basis for language evaluation and syllabi. The Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland has set nationwide syllabus requirements to the language courses in upper secondary schools by providing all upper secondary schools with one common language syllabus that should be the basis of every upper secondary school's own syllabus. The basics for upper secondary school syllabus provided by the ministry are connected to the Common European Framework, and the common reference levels from A1 to C1 are used in the ministry's descriptions of different language competence levels. (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 102).

My research will be aimed at second year upper secondary school students, and I will specifically concentrate on their spoken language skills. Therefore, in the next chapter I shall have a deeper look into what is expected from their level of spoken language competence according to the CEF, and the syllabus guidelines given by the Ministry of Culture and Education.

2.4 Communicative competence requirements provided by the CEF and the Ministry of Culture and Education for second year upper secondary school students

The Ministry of Culture and Education has set its own descriptive grid for evaluating language competence in upper secondary schools. The grid is largely based on the language competence levels provided by the Common European Framework, but it is an applied version of it. The common reference levels A1 to C1 given by the CEF are used in the ministry's grid, and they have been further subcategorized as A1.1, A1.2, A1.3, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, B1.2, B2.1, B2.2 and C1.1. (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 230-247)

Second year upper secondary school students should be on level B1 according to the CEF, and level B1.2 as defined by the Ministry of Education. On a global scale the CEF describes B1 learners as follows:

> Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012:24)

The qualitative aspects of spoken language use have been divided by the CEF into range, accuracy, fluency and coherence of speech, and interaction. Listed below are the requirements for B1-learners concerning each of the spoken language aspects:

1. Range: Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some hesitation and circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 29)

2. Accuracy: Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used 'routines' and patterns associated with more predictable situations. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 29)

3. Fluency: Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is evident, especially in longer stretches of free production. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 29)

4. Interaction: Can iniate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can repeat back part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 29)

5. Coherence: Can link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2012: 29)

The Ministry of Culture and Education has given its own descriptions concerning each of the learner levels, based on the ones provided by the CEF. Listed below are the ministry's requirements concerning the spoken language of B1.2 learners:

1. Is able to talk about common, concrete matters in a descriptive, defining and comparing manner, and is also able to explain other subjects, such as films,

books or music. Is able to communicate in a sure manner in most common situations. The level of linguistic expression might be less precise. (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 240)

2. Is able to express oneself relatively effortlessly. Although the speech contains pauses and breaks, it keeps going and the intended message is conveyed to the listener. (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 240)

3. Pronunciation is comprehensible, although intonation and stressing are not quite according to the target language. (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 240)

4. Is able to use a quite extensive vocabulary and common idioms. Also uses a variety of structures and more complicated sentences. (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 240)

5. Grammatical errors appear to some extent, but seldom cause problems even in larger communicative tasks or situations. (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 240)

A quick look into the requirements made by the Ministry of Education reveals a lot of similarities to the ones given by the CEF, however with a few additions. The educational ministry points out such aspects of spoken language as pronunciation, intonation and stress, as well as vocabulary and sentence structures in a more detailed manner than the CEF. These learner level descriptions of the educational ministry are used in upper secondary schools for evaluating spoken language learning, and thus affect the language syllabus as well as teaching materials, and the types of speaking tasks that are carried out in classes.

In the next chapter I will view some previous studies done on the topic of spoken language learning in upper secondary schools.

2.5 Previous studies on speaking skills

In this chapter I shall present previous studies on spoken language skills which is quite a vast area of research. However, having said that, I was not able to find even one study that would have a similar aspect with my research topic. In my study I wish to

concentrate on the upper secondary schools students' views and opinions on how they would like to rehearse their speaking skills, and what sort of tasks and exercises they find to be the most beneficial for developing those skills. Many of the earlier studies concentrate on viewing the teaching and learning of spoken language skills solely from the teachers' aspect.

One of the studies focusing on teachers'opinions on practising oral skills is a Master's Thesis by Maija-Liisa Huuskonen and Mirva Kähkönen. In their study *Practising Testing and Assessing Oral Skills in Finnish Upper Secondary Schools: Teachers' opinions (2006)*, Huuskonen and Kähkönen aimed to find out how large a role oral skills have in the Finnish upper secondary schools, how oral skills are practised, tested and evaluated, and what are the teachers' opinions on the subject. In addition, Huuskonen and Kähkönen wanted to find out how systematically oral skills are rehearsed, and what is the teachers' take on that, as well as how common the testing and evaluation of oral skills is, and whether the teachers see it as important in upper secondary school. Moreover, teachers' opinions on including an oral skills test in the matriculation examination were covered. The research data was gathered by a questionnaire which was sent to 150 teachers in Western Finland and 50 teachers in Oulu region. In the end, 80 teachers replied, and their replies formed the actual data used in the research. (Huuskonen & Kähkönen 2006: 1-2)

The study reveals several interesting facts about the status of oral skills in the upper secondary school English classes. Firstly, according to Huuskonen and Kähkönen (2006:125-141), the participant teachers in general had a positive attitude towards teaching and practising oral skills. However, the study reveals several issues that made it problematic to concentrate more on speaking. The teachers mentioned large group sizes, lack of time and the negative impact of the matriculation examination as problem sources. On the other hand, factors such as good course books and material, and the teachers' as well as the students' positive attitude towards practising speaking skills were stated as having a supportive effect on developing one's oral skills.

Nowadays, upper secondary school education stresses the matriculation examination in its courses, since it is expected from the students that they should perform well in the examination in order to gain easier access to higher level education later on. Accordingly, the teachers feel the pressure as well, and since the matriculation

examination does not include an oral skills test, practising speaking is often neglected in class. However, many of the teachers reacted rather cautiously to adding an oral skills test in the examination, but they did admit that if an oral test was compulsory, it would force the teachers and course materials to focus more on speaking skills as well, but it would also require the schools to offer more staff training to teachers. In fact, the study also revealed that especially older teachers felt that their training was inadequate when it comes to practising, testing and evaluating oral skills. Moreover, inadequate teacher training was directly related to some teachers having a rather suspicious attitude towards testing and evaluating oral skills. (Huuskonen & Kähkönen 2006: 125-141)

Soile Tattari (2001) conducted a research on upper comprehensive and upper secondary school English teachers' views about oral practise of language, and testing oral skills in her Master's Thesis *Practising and Testing Oral Language Skills at Schools: Teachers' Views.* In addition, she aimed to find out how common the testing of speaking skills on these educational levels was, as well as how and why oral skills were being tested at the time. Research data was gathered by sending a semi-structured questionnaire to 147 teachers in the Häme region. In the end, 96 teachers replied and formed the final research data. (Tattari 2001: 6-7)

The results of the research reveal that the status of teaching oral skills was strong, and that the teachers regarded oral practising as an important and an essential part of teaching. The teachers also reported that in general the students' attitude towards practising oral skills was motivated, and that their oral skills were good. When asked about the problems in teaching oral skills the teachers reported similar issues to those mentioned in Huuskonen and Kähkönen's research (2006), the main problems being large groups, and lack of time as well as good teaching material. In addition, the teachers' attitudes towards compulsory oral testing were similar to those reported by Huuskonen and Kähkönen (2006) in that the teachers felt cautious about the subject. However, they felt that it would raise the status of oral skills and, accordingly, the students' motivation to practise speaking. (Tattari 2001: 54-76)

According to Tattari (2001: 54-76), the testing of oral skills in upper comprehensive and upper secondary schools was relatively common. One third of the teachers tested oral skills regularly, one third only on certain English courses, while the last third did not test them separately at all. The teachers used both direct and indirect methods of testing,

usually interviews, reading tasks or role plays. Moreover, most of the teachers included several different methods in their tests to improve their validity. The teachers reported that the most significant problems in organizing an oral test were the lack of time and resources in addition to not getting an extra compensation for it, even though organizing an oral test was seen as rather time consuming.

Anne Burns concentrates on teaching speaking skills on a more general level in her article *Teaching speaking skills: a text-based syllabus approach* (2006). According to Burns (2006: 236), the greatest problem nowadays in teaching speaking skills is not whether it is done enough, but how it is done. Some rather old-fashioned methods such as grammar-translation and structuralism are still widely used as the basis for teaching oral skills. Therefore, oral activities focus on getting learners to widen their knowledge of speaking skills and their speaking competence through receiving language input, noticing and applying new vocabulary and structural patterns, as well as improving fluency and pronunciation. (Burns 2006: 236)

As a solution Burns (2006: 237) suggests a text-based syllabus for teaching speaking skills, meaning that different types of texts would be used as the basis of developing speaking tasks and activities for lessons. As opposed to, for example, structuralist or transformational-generative grammars, a text-based syllabus does not concentrate merely on a sentence as the basic unit of analysis, but on a whole text. There are two central ideas behind the text-based syllabus approach to teaching oral skills. Firstly, it emphasizes how language is used in social contexts, and secondly, how it is structured in relation to those contexts. (Burns 2006: 237)

Using a text-based syllabus would require a lot of changes in the current course material as well, since the majority of language learning and teaching materials currently do not incorporate insights from text-analysis. The spoken samples offered to teachers and students by course books commonly misrepresent the use of English in actual daily life, due to the fact that the dialogues in them are based on written grammar norms, and thus will not serve learners well outside the classroom in the linguistically dynamic environment. The purpose of the text-based syllabus approach is to expose learners to oral activities which contribute to ways of understanding, and participating in real-life interactions. (Burns 2006: 249)

3 TEACHING ORAL SKILLS

3.1 Language features affecting speaking and speaking tasks

Language features such as connected speech, expressive devices, lexis and grammar, and negotiation language are crucial for spoken production. Therefore, oral activities for students should take into account these features. Connected speech refers to the ability to modify, omit, add or weaken sounds (e.g. instead of saying *I would have done that* one can simply say *I would've done that*). Expressive devices relate to such aspects as changing pitch and stress, varying volume and speed, in addition to using other physical and non-verbal means to express how one feels. Therefore, they are needed for conveying correct meanings. Lexis and grammar deal with the ability to use common lexical phrases for certain language functions, such as agreeing or disagreeing, expressing shock, surprise, or approval. Students can also be equipped with useful phrases for various sorts of contexts, for instance a job interview. Negotiation language is important for seeking clarification, and showing the structure of what one is saying. Often when listening to someone talk, one needs to ask for clarification. (Harmer 2001: 269-270)

Knowledge of language features is not, however, the only presupposition for being able to speak fluently. Fluent speech also requires the ability to process information and language at the very moment speaking takes place. According to Harmer (2001: 271), effective speakers process language in their own minds, and also put it in a coherent order so that it comes out as comprehensible talk, and conveys the intended meanings. Furthermore, language processing requires the ability to retrieve words and phrases from memory, and organize them into syntactically and propositionally appropriate sequences (Harmer 2001: 271).

Speaking usually involves interaction with one or more participants, and therefore speaking involves a lot of listening, and an understanding of how the other participants feel. It is also necessary to know how to linguistically take turns, and allow others to do the same (Harmer 2001: 271). Moreover, in addition to how we respond to others' feelings, we need to be able to process the information they tell us immediately. The longer it takes for one to understand what the other is saying, the less effective an instant communicator he or she is (Harmer 2001: 271).

3.2 Speaking tasks

The practice of teaching oral skills nowadays aims at making students as fluent speakers as possible by concentrating more on the communicative side of speaking, instead of drawing too much attention to form related issues such as correct pronunciation. Bearing in mind the crucial language features and mental/social processing aspects mentioned earlier, Harmer (2001: 271-274) lists some good and most widely used communicative exercises, *acting from a script* being the first one. In these acting exercises students are asked to act out scenes from plays or coursebooks, or dialogues which they have written themselves. In case the students should perform their scene in front of the class, the teacher needs to make sure not to choose the shyest students first, and pay special attention to creating a supportive atmosphere in the class. Furthermore, the students have to be given time to rehearse their scenes or dialogues before they are asked to perform them. If the whole class works on the same scene, they can go through the script together with their teacher, and have a deeper look into appropriate stress, intonation, and speed. When the students are given the opportunity to practise these things before performing, the acting exercise becomes both a learning and a language producing activity. (Harmer 2001: 271)

Communication games are constructed to encourage communication between students, and they often depend on an information gap. In other words, a student is required to talk to a partner in order to solve a puzzle, draw a picture or put things in the right order on the basis of a description, or find similarities and differences between pictures, for instance. One popular communication game is called '*Twenty Questions'*, in which the students are divided into teams, and each team has a chairperson. The chairperson thinks of an object, and advices the team on whether the object represents *animal*, *vegetable*, or *mineral,* or possibly even a combination of the three. The team's task is to guess the object in twenty questions or less by asking only 'yes/no' questions. (Harmer 2001: 272) For further information on communication games, see for instance Hadfield (1987).

Discussion exercises are vastly used these days, but according to Harmer (2001: 272) they are problematic if students are asked to express their opinions in front of the whole

class, since some students may be shy, or cannot think of anything to say, or are not confident of the language they have to use. This problem can be solved with 'buzz groups', which are basically smaller groups of students. Before speaking in public, students have an opportunity for a quick discussion of the given topic in these small groups. Therefore, their stress level concerning a whole-class performance is reduced, since they get to think of ideas and the language to express them before performing publicly. Moreover, buzz groups can be used for all sorts of discussion tasks. Discussion exercises can be pre-planned or they can just happen in the middle of lessons. Often unprepared discussions provide some of the most enjoyable and productive speaking in class, but their success depends on the teacher's ability to prompt, encourage, and even change his or her attitude to errors. The success of pre-planned discussions, however, depends on the way the students are asked to approach the exercise. (Harmer 2001: 273)

Prepared talks, also known as *presentations*, are also popular. For this activity students are asked to prepare a presentation on a given topic, or a topic of their own choice. Since presentations are prepared beforehand, they are more 'writing-like', and not designed for informal spontaneous discussion. However, it is preferred that students have their speeches on the basis of notes rather than whole scripts. Prepared talks can be unpleasant for some students, especially if they have to speak for the whole class, but they can also be quite interesting and useful for both speakers and listeners, if properly organized. In presentations the development of the talk from original ideas into a finished speech is a crucial and an important process. (Harmer 2001: 274)

According to Harmer (2001: 274), *questionnaires* are also among the group of useful communicative speaking tasks, since they are pre-planned and, therefore, the questioner and the respondent have something to say to each other for sure. Questionnaires may encourage the natural use of certain repetitive language patterns, if they are not too tightly constructed, and the students can design them on any suitable topic. Harmer (2001: 274) also points out that the teacher can act as a resource, and help the students construct the questionnaires. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire can be put into further use by designing, for example, written work, discussions or prepared talks on the basis of them.

Simulation and *role play* exercises are considered beneficial for many students, since they are based on real-life situations. In these activities students 'simulate' a real-life encounter , for example a business meeting, in which they either act as themselves, or take on a role of a different character with thoughts and feelings the students do not have to share. Simulation and role play contribute to encouraging general oral fluency, and they can also be used to prepare students for specific situations. Furthermore, simulation and role play can be fun, and thus increase students' motivation. They also give a great opportunity for the more hesitant students to express their thoughts freely, since they are not responsible for what they say in the same way as they would be, if they actually spoke for themselves. Another advantage of simulation and role play exercises is the fact that they enable students to deploy a wider range of language compared to some more task-centered activities, for instance. (Harmer 2001: 274-275) However, simulation has to meet a few specific characteristics to work properly (for more information, see Jones 1982: 4-7). Furthermore, simulation and role play are nowadays not only used as speaking exercises in lessons, but they also offer a good tool for evaluating speaking skills, and have become increasingly popular in testing students' oral skills (Johnson 2008: 319).

According to Thornbury (2005: 90-91), no matter which oral exercises are used in lessons, they should meet a few crucial criteria in order to be successful. Firstly, Thornbury (2005: 90) discusses the criterion of *productivity,* according to which a speaking activity should get students to talk as much as possible, and use vocabulary and different sentence structures as widely as possible. If students are able to complete, for example, an information gap task by just exchanging isolated words, it can hardly be called productive use of language. Also if only a couple of students participate in a discussion, or they use mainly their first language, the speaking activity is not worth the time spent. (Thornbury 2005: 90)

Speaking tasks should also be *purposeful.* If a speaking task has a clear outcome which requires students to work together to achieve it, it also contributes to the criterion of productivity. For instance, if students have to achieve an agreed decision in a task, their discussion will likely be more oriented, and encourage all students to participate. Another way of ensuring that the speaking activity is purposeful and engages all students is to make students report to the class on their discussion, or turn the task into a race. (Thornbury 2005: 90)

Another important criterion for speaking activities is *interactivity*. Oral tasks should require students to pay attention to the effect they have on their audience, otherwise oral tasks prepare students rather poorly for real-life language use. Even the more formal, restricted speaking tasks, such as presentation, should be completed in a context that provides at least the possibility of interaction. In other words, there needs to be an audience that can show interest, understanding, or place questions and make comments at the end. (Thornbury 2005: 91)

Speaking tasks should also provide students with a proper level of *challenge*. They need to force students to deploy their communicative resources as extensively as possible. Accordingly, students will experience achievement and even excitement about the task. However, if the degree of challenge is too high, it can inhibit students' use of foreign language, and make them use their first language instead. Therefore, the teacher needs to be careful, and adjust the activity according to individual learners. (Thornbury 2005: 91)

Thornbury (2005: 91) points out that in addition to being challenging, oral exercises also have to meet the *safety* criterion. Students need to feel confident that they can perform the challenging speaking tasks without risks. This means that the atmosphere in the classroom should be open, supportive, and non-judgmental concerning errors. Students also need to be able to rely on the fact that the teacher is always there to help them, if they need it. (Thornbury 2005: 91)

Finally, speaking tasks need to be *authentic*, and relate to real-life language use at least to some extent. In order to achieve authenticity, learners occasionally need to perform in real operating conditions, meaning spontaneous, unassisted, and minimally prepared speaking. Authenticity also requires the use of topics, genres and situations that cater for students' needs and interests. (Thornbury 2005: 91)

Harmer (2001: 275-276) also discusses the importance of the teacher in making the communicative exercises as successful as possible. According to Harmer (2001: 275-276), the teacher has three significant roles during speaking exercises. Firstly, the teacher acts as a *prompter*, who helps the students move forward in their talking in case they cannot think of what to say next, or lose the fluency of their speech for some other reason. However, the teacher has to interfere as supportively as possible, without disrupting the flow of the conversation.

Secondly, sometimes it is crucial for an oral exercise that the teacher takes on a role of a *participant.* In other words, the teacher participates in the discussion, helping the activity move forward by presenting new information, making sure every student keeps focus on the exercise, and also paying attention to keeping the atmosphere creative. However, the teacher should beware of over-participating, and taking the dominant role in the discussion. (Harmer 2001: 275-276)

Thirdly, the teacher should act as a *feedback provider.* The challenge with giving feedback is knowing when the moment is right for it, and how to give it. If the students are in the middle of a speaking exercise, and the teacher over-corrects their talk, it may restrict the students on the expense of the communicativeness of the activity. On the other hand, there can be moments when subtle teacher correction may just be what the students need to get out of misunderstandings and hesitations. Nevertheless, it is crucial that the students get to evaluate their performance of an exercise once they have completed it, and that the teacher also gives his or her opinion on what the students did well. The teacher should comment on the content of the activity as well as the language the students deployed. (Harmer 2001: 275-276)

3.3 Pronunciation

Teaching speaking skills in general is rather demanding on teachers compared to teaching other language skills, such as writing (Rivers 1981: 188). The same goes for teaching pronunciation which has lost its significance over the years while the emphasis on communicative competence has increased. For this reason, teachers nowadays make little attempt to teach pronunciation, and in the worst case only make haste comments about it every now and then during lessons. According to Harmer (2001: 183), it is possible that some teachers feel anxiety over teaching sounds and intonation, or they may even think that they already have enough to do without having to pay attention to teaching pronunciation as well. Furthermore, teachers may think it is easier to concentrate on analyzing the features of written language, or discussing the contents of texts (Rivers 1981: 188). Moreover, Harmer (2001: 183) points out that some teachers believe their students acquire a sufficient level of pronunciation without any actual pronunciation teaching. According to Rivers (1981: 188), some teachers think that students also acquire a lot of passive knowledge about speaking and pronunciation

through written exercises, and that this passive knowledge becomes active in speaking situations.

However, even though some students undoubtedly can acquire a rather good level of pronunciation without specific teaching, there are advantages in focusing on pronunciation in lessons. First of all, teaching pronunciation makes students aware of the different sounds and sound features of a language. If students are also shown how the sounds are made in the mouth, and where words should be stressed, they can eventually improve their own speaking, and become more comprehensible and intelligible. Furthermore, once students are able to separate distinct sounds in a speech, it is easier for them to understand what others are saying as well. (Harmer 2001: 183)

It is constantly debated whether students of a foreign language should aim to perfect pronunciation, and eventually sound like native-speakers of the target language, or whether it is enough that their speech is simply intelligible at all times. Every teacher and student has their own opinion on the subject. Some students are ready to study and rehearse extremely hard to reach as flawless pronunciation as possible, while others may wish to preserve their own cultural identity and accent while speaking in a foreign language. Teachers have to reach a consensus between these two opposites, and often it means that they settle with the intelligibility as the prime goal of pronunciation teaching. The intelligibility goal implies that students have to master a level of pronunciation which is enough for them to be always understood. If the students' pronunciation is not at this level, their ability to communicate effectively is in danger. Nevertheless, if some students wish to train their pronunciation to a higher level than intelligibility, they should be given the chance to do it. (Harmer 2001: 184)

According to Harmer (2001: 184), intelligibility as the goal of pronunciation teaching implies that some pronunciation features need to be given more attention than others by teachers. For instance, it is crucial for students to be able to produce some sounds spot on, or they may not be understood correctly. Incorrect stress in words and phrases, as well as wrong intonation can also contribute to intelligibility problems, and lead to misunderstandings. Jenkins (1998: 121) also views issues such as certain segmentals, nuclear stress and effective use of articulatory setting as having the greatest significance on intelligibility, and suggests focusing pronunciation teaching on them.

Another controversial issue in teaching pronunciation concerns the use of phonemic alphabet. The use of phonemic symbols of English is not necessary for students to be able to hear the distinct sounds, or learn to produce them. Moreover, teachers can just simply describe and explain how sounds are made, or demonstrate them by drawing pictures of the mouth and lips. However, English language causes problems for many students, since the sounds and spelling are not in correspondence, and for them introducing the different phonemes and their symbols may be beneficial. Another reason in favour of using phonemic symbols is the fact that dictionaries often present the pronunciation of words in phonemic symbols, and if students are familiar with the symbols, they know how to pronounce words from dictionaries without having to hear them first. Furthermore, it is easier for teachers to explain possible pronunciation errors and why they happen, if also students know the phonemic symbols. Some teachers feel that the symbols would only mean extra work for students, especially if students were required to write them, and truly enough that could be the case, for example, for younger students. However, it would be enough to train students to recognize the symbols in order to benefit from them, and obviously they would be introduced to the different symbols gradually. (Harmer 2001: 185-186) For further information on pronunciation and how to teach it, see for instance Dalton and Seidlhofer (1995), Kelly (2000), and Rogerson-Revell (2011).

4 DATA AND METHOD OF RESEARCH

In the following chapter I will describe in detail how the research data was gathered. Secondly, I will have a deeper look into the method used in my research, and how the data was collected and analysed.

4.1 The goals of the research

In my research I aim to find out how speaking skills are being taught and trained in upper secondary schools in Finland, which types of oral exercises students and teachers like the best and see as most useful in terms of developing oral skills, and how their views meet. Oral skills in itself is a vast area of research, and has become increasingly popular during the last decades. However, when the concentration of such research has

been in the school world and on the teaching and exercises it offers for developing oral skills, the focus has been on the opinions and views of teachers of different school levels. Therefore, there is definitely a need for the upper secondary school students to get their opinions heard as well, since being on the learner side they form the most crucial group when discussing ways to effectively practise speaking skills. The research questions to be answered in the current study are:

1. Which sort of oral practices the students wish to do the most? Which sort of practices do they feel to be the most useful considering learning to speak English better?
2. Which sort of oral practices the teachers prefer to give to their students? Which sort of practices do they feel to be the most useful considering learning to speak English better?
3. How do the students' and the teachers' views meet? How should the teaching of speaking skills be developed?

4.2 Choice of methodology

The research data was gathered by two separate questionnaires, one for the students and the other for the teachers. Both of the questionnaires included mainly open-ended questions. I chose to use open-ended questions since I aimed to find out students' and teachers' opinions, views and attitudes on the research subject, and open-ended questions allow the participants to express themselves more freely and truthfully. Due to the fact that my aim was to explore students' and teachers' opinions and views on the subject of teaching and practising oral skills, a qualitative research method seemed most suitable and was used.

Qualitative studies have many strengths as Dörnyei (2007: 39-41) points out. Qualitative study is a good way to get new information on topics due to its' exploratory nature. Moreover, when having to explain complex situations better, one may feel that qualitative analysis can be of help. Qualitative studies also go deeper into the research topic as they seek to find out reasons behind the results and answer any "why" questions. They also widen our understanding of things, since their target is not to form one conclusion that could be generalized, but to offer data of which several

interpretations can be made through analysis. Qualitative studies are also more flexible in terms of mistakes which usually do not ruin the whole research, and can even reveal unexpected, interesting results. Moreover, a qualitative research offers rich material for the research report.

Qualitative research has also its' weaknesses. First of all, making generalizations on the basis of a qualitative study is quite difficult, since the sample size of such a study is usually small. Second, the researcher's personal opinions and attitudes can affect the analysis and interpretation of results, making them biased. Third, it can be said that qualitative methods lack methodological firmness. Fourth, determining which data can be generalized, and which data applies only to the one case can be rather difficult. Accordingly, there is a risk of constructing either too wide or too narrow theories. Finally, analysing qualitative data is time consuming and takes a lot of effort. (Dörnyei 2007: 41-42)

4.3 Questionnaire

Questionnaire is one of the most used methods to gather empirical information based on personal experiences (Alanen, Dufva, Kalaja 2011: 146). I chose questionnaire as the method to obtain research data, since it is a much more convenient way to gather a larger quantity of data at once compared to interviews, for example. Moreover, questionnaires help gather data more quickly, and they take much less effort than interviews from the part of the participants, since one does not need to organize interview sessions. A questionnaire also makes data processing faster and more straightforward. Furthermore, the level of anonymity in questionnaires is a lot higher than in interviews, which contributes to finding the participants easier. (Dörnyei 2007: 115)

Questionnaire, however, has its disadvantages as well. The answers gathered through a questionnaire are often quite simple and superficial due to the fact that the questions must be simple in order for everyone to fully understand them. There can also be only a limited number of questions and they cannot be too deep in detail, since usually people do not wish to spend a lot of time answering them. Sometimes people can also feel unmotivated to answer questions or they can even be unreliable, thus it is practically impossible to know who has answered carefully and truthfully, and who just for the

sake of answering. Finally, if a questionnaire is too long or boring, undoubtedly the level of fatigue of the respondents will rise while answering, and thus leave a mark on the answers. (Dörnyei 2003: 10-14)

Inspite of all of the disadvantages mentioned above the questionnaire was still the most suitable data gathering method for the present study, and the problems of a questionnaire where kept in mind when formulating the questions. I used two separate questionnaires, one for upper secondary school students and the other for their teachers, since in the questions for the teachers I had to take into account their professional aspect. The questionnaires were based on my research questions, and on the background literature. The questionnaire for students included ten questions, and the one for teachers consisted of nine questions. The only piece of background information asked of the participants was their gender, as no additional information was deemed necessary. The questionnaires can be found as appendices in the end of this thesis.

The questions in the questionnaire for students dealt with the following topics: oral exercises offered to students by course books, course book exercises used the most and the least on lessons, oral exercises offered to students by their teacher, oral exercises the students felt to be the most and least pleasant, oral exercises seen by the students as the most beneficial in terms of developing speaking skills, oral exercises the students would like to add to courses, reasons and factors that would make students rehearse their speaking skills more, and the emphasis given to oral skills in upper secondary school education.

The questions for teachers dealt with somewhat similar topics with a few exceptions: oral skills courses offered by the school, oral exercises used by the teachers in their teaching, oral exercises used the most and the least by the teachers, oral exercises the teachers felt to be the most beneficial for students in terms of learning, and exercises they liked to offer their students the most, problematic issues affecting teaching speaking skills and ways to solve those problems, factors that encourage teachers to teach oral skills, the importance of practising oral skills in upper secondary school from the teachers' point of view, and the role of oral skills in upper secondary school education nowadays and the teachers opinions on it.

Most of the questions on the two questionnaires were open-ended questions, since they give the respondents a better opportunity to freely express their views and opinions, and as close to the truth as possible (Hirsjärvi *et al*. 1997: 201). Moreover, the nature of the questions used in the questionnaire required an open-ended question form, as the questions were rather opinion and attitude seeking. According to Hirsjärvi *et al*. (1997: 201), open-ended questions make it possible to recognize motivation related factors, and the frameworks of the respondents. Moreover, open-ended questions do not suggest answers. They present the knowledge of the respondents and what is crucial in their thinking (Hirsjärvi *et al.* 1997: 201).

4.4 Participants

I contacted two upper secondary schools and four teachers by email in pursuit of participants for my study. One of the schools was situated in middle Finland, and the other in Eastern Finland. I chose these two schools since I already knew the teachers to some extent, and had worked there as a substitute teacher on several occasions. Accordingly, I felt quite confident that the two schools and the teachers would participate, and they did.

I wanted to carry out my research on second year upper secondary school students, since they had already had several English courses, and thus they had more experience about the ways of teaching and learning oral skills in upper secondary schools than, for example, first year students. All of the four teachers I contacted had English courses going on for second year students, and we arranged for me to go to the schools and in the groups to carry out the research. The research questionnaire was answered by four teachers and 90 students. In the end, 84 of the questionnaires answered by students and all of the questionnaires answered by teachers were included in the study.

The only piece of background information asked from the participants was their gender. Since all of the student participants were second year students, there was no need to inquire about their age. Three of the teachers were female and one male. In the case of the students 43 were female and 41 male. The student participants' gender is presented in frequencies and percentages in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants' gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	41	48.8
Female	43	51.2

4.5 Data collection and analysis

The research was carried out as a controlled study, in which the researcher personally gives the questionnaires to the participants, explains the purpose of their research in detail, gives advice on filling the questionnaire, and answers any questions the participants may have concerning the study (Hirsjärvi *et al.* 1997: 197). Controlled study was chosen as a method firstly, since the upper secondary schools participating in the study were at a reasonable distance to Jyväskylä, thus visiting them personally was possible. Secondly, it was thought that the participants would feel more motivated to answer the questionnaire, if they actually got to see who they are doing it for, and if the researcher personally told them what was being studied and why. The data were gathered in January 2013.

The data was handled anonymously, and analyzed qualitatively, as mentioned earlier. The questionnaire results were divided into themes according to the topics of the questions, and the contents of the answers were roughly categorized and counted. No hypotheses were made before the study. Therefore, the presentation of the data is descriptive. Some of the data is presented in percentages and frequencies.

5   RESULTS

In this section I will present the results of the study. Firstly, I will present the results of the student questionnaires and, secondly, of the teacher questionnaires. The results will be presented according to the topics of the questions on the questionnaires. Finally, the students' and teachers' views are compared.

5.1 Students' opinions on teaching and learning oral skills

Oral exercises offered by the course books

The students were asked to mark which oral exercises their English course books include, and according to the results, pair and group discussion exercises have a clearly dominant position in the course material, since 80 students mentioned pair discussion and 79 students group discussion in their answers. Dialogue, presentation and pronunciation exercises also seemed to be often present in the course books, as they got over 60 mentions from the students. Describing a picture and debate got over 30 mentions, and therefore can be said to have quite a small role in the books. Furthermore, role play was mentioned by 11 students only. Thus, the course material evidently does not use role play as an oral exercise that often. The exercise types and the frequency of mentions can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Oral exercises offered by course books

Oral exercise type	Frequency out of 84 students
Pair discussion	80
Group discussion	79
Dialogue	66
Presentation	66
Pronunciation exercises	60
Describing a picture	37
Debate	31
Role play	11

The students were also asked to list any additional exercise types the books may include besides those mentioned above. The most common additions were speech, preparing and advertisement, preparing a CV, and reading aloud texts.

Oral exercises used the most and the least in lessons

Of all exercises used in lessons discussion exercises were most common. The vast majority of the students stated that pair discussion (free discussion of a given topic) is used the most, since it was mentioned by 69 students. Naturally, the second most used

oral exercise turned out to be group discussion, which was mentioned by 44 students. 15 students stated that dialogue (a pair discussion with given lines) was one of the most used oral exercises. Pronunciation exercises (2 students) and describing a picture (2 students) were also mentioned. Furthermore, three students felt that reading aloud textbook chapters was used the most to rehearse speaking, and one student only wished to state that none of the different oral exercise types is used enough. The most used oral exercises and the frequency of mentions is listed in Table 3.

Table 3. The most used oral exercises

Oral exercise type	Frequency of mentions out 84 students
Pair discussion	69
Group discussion	44
Dialogue	15
Reading aloud	3
Pronunciation exercises	2
Describing a picture	2

Presentation was the least used oral exercise with 48 students mentioning it. The second least used was debate (29 students). Pronunciation exercises also scored quite high with 18 mentions, along with describing a picture (15 students). Role plays were stated by 12 students. Dialogue got 5 and group discussion 7 mentions. The least used oral exercises and the frequency of mentions can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. The least used oral exercises

Oral exercise type	Frequency of mentions out of 84 students
Presentation	48
Debate	29
Pronunciation exercises	18
Describing a picture	15
Role play	12
Group discussion	7
Dialogue	5

The results were as expected but what was surprising was the low score of pronunciation exercises. It is known that the status of pronunciation has significantly decreased in the last decades, since more modern linguistic studies and theories on language learning and teaching started encouraging communicational language education. However, according to the results of the present study, one might think that pronunciation has been completely forgotten.

Oral exercises offered by teachers in addition to course book material

According to the students, teachers offer them several additional ways of exercising oral skills in addition to the exercises on course books. The majority of students stated that their teacher gives them pair and group discussion exercises on varied topics. Pronunciation exercises, presentations, dialogues and reading aloud texts were also frequently mentioned. Some students said that in addition to discussions in pairs and groups their teacher asks them questions at times and, thus, discusses with the whole group. Furthermore, translation exercises, games, interviews and presenting one's own work were mentioned by a few students. It is also worth noting that 14 students stated that their teacher does not offer any additional oral exercises. However, it might be that some students just did not remember whether an exercise has been in the course books, or offered solely by their teacher. The different exercise types mentioned in the students' answers and the frequencies are listed in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Oral exercises offered by teachers

Oral exercise type	Frequency of mentions out of 84 students
Pair discussion	17
Group discussion	17
Pronunciation exercise	10
Presentation	10
Dialogue	10
Reading aloud	10
Discussions with teacher	6
Translation	6
Games	2
Interview	1
Presenting one's work in a group	1

Oral exercises seen as the most and the least pleasant, and why

The majority of students (50) reported pair discussion to be the most pleasant way of rehearsing oral skills, since the students felt it to be a more relaxed and free type of exercise, in which one gets to express one's opinions and has more turns to talk. Furthermore, the students emphasized the absence of any social pressure in pair discussions. They stated that they do not need to be afraid of making grammatical errors or bad pronunciation, since only one person hears what you say. The students preferred pair discussion also because if they would make mistakes, their partner could help out. The following examples illustrate this:

> Example 1.
>
> *"Parikeskustelut, koska silloin ei ole paineita, ja tulee puhuttua enemmän."*
>
> *"Pair discussions, because there is no pressure, and one gets to speak more."*
>
> Example 2.
>
> *"Parikeskustelut, sillä kaverilta saa apua, jos ei osaa. Jos esim. lausuu väärin, ei koko luokka ole kuulemassa."*
>
> *"Pair discussions, because your partner can help you out, if you do not know how to say something. If you pronounce wrong, the whole class cannot hear you."*

Group discussions were named by 33 students as the most pleasant oral exercise due to the same reasons as pair discussions. In addition to the low level of social pressure, the students stressed the interactional side of group discussions. They reported that in groups a variety of opinions rises, which makes the conversation a lot more interesting, and more genuine. The aspect of pair feedback and error correction was also emphasized, as can be seen in the following examples:

> Example 3.
>
> *"Ryhmäkeskustelut, koska kaikki saavat puhua yhtä paljon, ja kaverit korjaavat tarvittaessa."*
>
> *"Group discussions, because everybody gets to talk as much as the others, and friends will help out when needed."*
>
> Example 4.
>
> *"Monipuolisinta keskustelua syntyy usein ryhmissä (4-5 hlöä). Muut ryhmän jäsenet tuovat ilmi uusia näkökulmia, jolloin keskustelustakin kehkeytyy aidompi ja sisällökkäämpi."*
>
> *"The most varied discussion often takes place in groups (4-5 people). Other group members bring new viewpoints to the discussion, and thus the discussion becomes more genuine and richer in content."*

Some students reported reading texts aloud as the most pleasant oral exercise, and usually it was justified by stating that it is an easy way to rehearse speaking, since one does not need to come up with anything to say. Pronunciation exercises were also named by a few students, since they felt that in upper secondary school the vocabulary gets more difficult, and thus needs more practising. Some students reported debate as their favourite mainly since it can work as a good platform for a genuine discussion, in which a variety of opinions occurs. In addition, role plays, presentations, describing pictures, dialogues, translations and discussions with non-native Finnish speakers were mentioned a few times as the most pleasant ways to practise oral skills. Moreover, the students frequently mentioned that no matter how oral skills are rehearsed, the topics need to be of interest to them, or they need to relate to real life situations to make the exercises pleasant. The exercises listed as the most pleasant ones by the students and the frequencies are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Oral exercises seen as the most pleasant by students

Oral exercise type	Frequency of mentions out of 84 students
Pair discussion	50
Group discussion	33
Reading aloud	5
Pronunciation exercise	4
Debate	4
Presentation	3
Dialogue	3
Role play	1
Describing a picture	1
Translation	1
Discussion with non-native Finnish speaker	1

The least pleasant oral exercise was clearly presentation with 51 mentions. In nearly all the cases the justification behind presentation related to social pressure, the fear of talking alone to a large audience and the fear of making mistakes in front of the audience. Some students stated the feeling of insecurity coming from within, since they are shy and do not like to perform in public, while some students reported the use of foreign language being the main source of insecurity. The anxiety to speak is well illustrated by the following examples:

> Example 5.
>
> *"Esitelmät. On pelottavaa mennä puhumaan yksin englantia koko luokan eteen."*
>
> *"Presentations. It is scary to speak in English in front of the whole class."*

Example 6.

"Esitelmät, sillä silloin kielioppivirheillä on merkitystä ja joutuu esiintymään vieraalla kielellä (oma itsevarmuus ei riitä)."

"Presentations, because grammatical errors make a difference then, and one has to perform in a foreign language (my own confidence is not enough)."

Some students reported group discussion as the least pleasant oral exercise, and the reasons behind it were the same as with presentation. Debate was also mentioned by some students, since they felt that it is challenging to debate about an unfamiliar topic, and often one does not even get enough turns to speak. Other unpleasant exercises mentioned by a few students were role play, dialogue, pair discussion, pronunciation exercises and reading aloud. Furthermore, a handful of students stated only that any type of oral exercise is unpleasant, if one has to work with unfamiliar students, if the topic is boring, or if a large number of people can hear one talking. The least pleasant oral exercises named by the students and the frequencies are listed in Table 7.

Table 7. Oral exercises seen as the least pleasant by the students

Oral exercise type	Frequency of mentions out of 84 students
Presentation	51
Group discussion	6
Debate	6
Role play	5
Pronunciation exercise	4
Dialogue	2
Pair discussion	2
Reading aloud	1

The results were as expected. It is worth noting that there is a clear correlation between the exercises the students see as most and least pleasant, and the most and least used exercises. It can be said that the teachers cater well for their students wishes, since the students prefer pair and group discussions, and they are also the exercise types used the most on lessons. Accordingly, presentation was the most unpleasant and the least used oral exercise.

The most beneficial oral exercises in terms of developing oral skills

The vast majority of students consider discussion exercises to be the most beneficial in terms of developing speaking skills. According to the answers, it does not matter whether a discussion takes place in pairs or larger groups, but there are a number of other criteria that make discussion exercises useful. Firstly, the students reported that the conversation topics have to be of interest to them, or relate to real life issues in order to make the students feel motivated. Secondly, they emphasized the importance of getting to talk as much as possible during discussions, and being able to express their opinions about genuine matters. Thirdly, it was crucial for the students that the discussions are not made too restricted by setting too tight guidelines concerning the execution of a discussion exercise. Instead, they valued free discussion which is as close to a real life conversation as possible. Furthermore, the students mentioned that discussions with non-native Finnish speakers would be extremely beneficial, since they would have to use English only. The results indicate a correlation between the exercises the students find most pleasant, most beneficial and which are also used the most on lessons. Accordingly, it seems that what the students wish to do the most, what teachers have them do the most, and what makes them learn the most are in balance. The following examples illustrate which types of exercises the students thought to be most beneficial:

> Example 7.
>
> *"Vapaamuotoiset keskustelut, koska niissä ollaan vuorovaikutuksessa toisten kanssa, ja asian voi esittää omalla tavallaan."*
>
> *"Free discussions, because one interacts with others in those, and one can express oneself in one's own way."*

Example 8.

"Tilanteet, joissa suomea ei ole mahdollista käyttää. Esim. ulkomaalaisten kanssa keskusteleminen."

"Situations in which it is impossible to use Finnish. For example, discussing with foreigners."

Example 9.

"Erilaiset keskustelut, joissa täytyy osata ilmaista itseään."

"Different sorts of discussions in which one has to be able to express oneself."

In addition to discussions, the students pointed out the importance of oral exercises which relate to real life situations, such as travelling or asking for advice etc. They reported these types of exercises as the most beneficial, since they would teach them vocabulary and sentence structures which they might actually need at some point in their lives. The following example shows the wish for real life based exercises:

Example 10.

"Improvisoitua johonkin tilanteeseen, esim. miten kysyä tietä tms."

"Improvised on the basis of a situation, for example how to ask for a way, etc."

Another factor to be taken into account in the students' answers was their desire to practise pronunciation. Based on the answers, pronunciation has been neglected in language teaching, and the students wished to receive guidance to it when performing oral exercises. Some students even stated that learning how to pronounce correctly would improve their listening skills as well, as can be seen in the following example:

Example 11.

"Ääntämisharjoitukset, koska silloin puhetta ymmärtäisi paremmin (myös kuuntelukokeissa)."

"Pronunciation exercises, because then one would understand talking better (also in listening comprehension tests)."

The results showed, surprisingly, that presentations were also regarded as rather beneficial even though they were on the top of the list of the most unpleasant exercises. This could be due to the fact that students have to do a lot of independent work to

prepare a presentation, including checking any unfamiliar words for the correct pronunciation. Moreover, as stressful as keeping a presentation was for the students, one might think that the students find it useful having to read aloud a longer piece of text and perhaps receiving corrective feedback, even though it would be for a larger audience.

Exercises the students would like to add to courses

The students were all in all rather pleased with the variety of exercises used, since a little less than half of them replied that they would not add any oral exercises to English courses. The majority of those, who did wish to add something, spoke for more discussion exercises in groups or pairs. However, they stressed the importance of free discussion based on interesting topics, and the ability to express their true opinions in them. Furthermore, the students wished for shared courses with exchange students, and discussions with native English speakers to practise their speaking efficiently, although they did recognize the challenges in organising such activities. The following examples illustrate these topics:

> Example 12.
>
> *"Nuoria kiinnostavia ja heille ajankohtaisia aiheita käsitteleviä keskusteluja."*
>
> *"Discussions which are of interest to young people, and deal with issues that are current for them."*
>
> Example 13.
>
> *"Paras harjoitus olisi tietysti englantilaisen kanssa keskusteleminen, mutta se on harvoin tunneilla mahdollista. Mahdollisimman mielenkiintoisia harjoituksia, jotka käsittelisivät mielenkiintoisia asioita."*
>
> *"The best exercise would be to talk with and English person, of course, but it is seldom possible in lessons. As interesting exercises as possible that would deal with interesting topics."*

The importance of real life based situations came evident also in the oral exercises the students would like to add to courses. The students wished for exercises which would equip them with an ability to function in everyday situations. They asked specifically for more useful vocabulary and sentence structures, which is illustrated by the following example:

Example 14.

"Oikeita tilanteita, joissa voisi oppia hyödyllistä sanastoa sekä sanontatapoja."

"Real situations, in which one could learn useful vocabulary and ways of expression."

Another issue that rose from the answers was the students need to rehearse pronunciation more, regardless of which types of oral exercises they wished to add to the courses. Even some of those students, who felt that the current variety of exercises used on lessons was sufficient, mentioned the need for improving pronunciation, as can be seen from the example below:

Example 15.

"Suullisia harjoituksia on sopivasti, mutta jos jotain pitäisi ottaa lisää, niin ääntämistä voisi harjoitella lisää."

"The amount of oral exercises is sufficient, but if something had to be added, pronunciation could be rehearsed more."

Reasons that would make students rehearse speaking more

The results clearly revealed three crucial factors when the students were asked to explain which reasons would get them to practise oral skills more. Firstly, the students reported the aspect of need. According to them, they would rehearse speaking skills more if they were sure that they would need those skills in the future, either for studying or working purposes, or if they needed oral skills in their daily lives, which can be seen in the following examples:

Example 16.

"Jos tarvitsisin suullista kielitaitoa enemmän päivittäin, esim. kotona tai töissä."

"If I needed speaking skills more on a daily basis, for example at home or at work."

Example 17.

"Jos tietäisin, minne olisin menossa jatko-opintoihin, ja alalla tarvittaisiin ja painotettaisiin englannin kieltä."

"If I knew what I was going to study in the future, and if English was needed and emphasized on that field of study."

37

The second factor that stood out from the answers was based on an environmental requirement to speak English. The students reported that if they had foreign friends, or they were travelling abroad, or going somewhere as an exchange student, they would be forced to rehearse their speaking skills. Furthermore, shared courses with exchange students were mentioned. The following example illustrates the aspect of travelling and friends:

> Example 18.
>
> *"Jos olisin menossa ulkomaille pitkäksi aikaa, tai kaverini puhuisi äidinkielenään englantia."*
>
> *"If I was travelling abroad for a longer period of time, or if a friend of mine spoke English as his/her mother tonque."*

The third clear theme in the answers was the status of oral skills in upper secondary school education. The students felt that if oral skills were emphasized more, or had more significance to their course grades, they would put more effort into practising speaking. Naturally, the students suggested including oral tests into course exams, and also to the matriculation examination in order to improve the status of speaking. The following example speaks for the testing of oral skills:

> Example 19.
>
> *"Harjoittelisin puhumista enemmän, jos se vaikuttaisi enemmän arvosanoihin."*
>
> *"I would rehearse speaking more, if it had more effect on the course grades."*

Other reasons for improving the students' willingness to rehearse speaking were closely connected to the actual English lessons. Firstly, the students argued that if the topics and exercises on lessons were more interesting, their motivation to rehearse oral skills would improve. Exercises related to everyday life and the cultures of English speaking people were specifically mentioned. Secondly, the students pointed out the importance of their teacher. If the teacher was inspiring and enthusiastic, the students' level of motivation would rise. Thirdly, the students wished for minimizing the pressure of performing, and increasing the feeling of success on lessons. The factors related to lessons themselves are illustrated by the following examples:

Example 20.

"Pienet ja kannustavat ryhmät, sekä onnistumisen tunne."

"Small and supporting groups, and the feeling of success."

Example 21.

"Mielenkiintoiset, Englannin kulttuuriin paneutuvat tehtävät, joista hyötyisi samalla niin, että saisi kulttuuritietämystä."

"Interesting exercises which deal with the English culture, and which would also benefit by gaining one's cultural knowledge."

The emphasis given to oral skills in upper secondary school education

The students were asked to evaluate how much oral skills are being emphasized on English courses on a scale of 1 to 4 (1= not at all, 2= little, 3= sufficiently, 4= too much). The results were quite clear, since 52 students (61,9%) reported that the emphasis is sufficient. However, 31 students (36,9%) thought that oral skills were given little attention, and only one student (1,2%) had replied *too much*. The results are presented in Table 8 as frequencies and percentages.

Table 8. The emphasis given to oral skills on a scale of 1-4

Scale grade	Frequency out of 84 students	Percentage
1= not at all	0	0
2= little	31	36,9
3= sufficient	52	61,9
4= too much	1	1,2

According to these results, the status of oral skills in upper secondary school language education has improved remarkably, and is now at a fairly good level. However, it is evident that oral skills still need to be stressed more, since nearly 37% of the students thought that they are given only little value.

5.2 Teachers' opinions on teaching and learning oral skills

Oral skills courses offered by the school

All of the four teachers reported that their school offers only one course specifically aimed at rehearsing oral skills. The course, ENA8, is the same for each upper secondary school, and its main contents and goals are described in the national syllabus for Finnish upper secondary schools, although teachers naturally can shape the course program a bit. However, the course is not compulsory. According to the national syllabus, the contents of the ENA8 course should be tied to such topics as global development, current events, and issues related to different world views (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 103).

On the course ENA8 the teachers reported to use for example such exercises as debate, acting, improvisation, and pair and group discussions. Furthermore, they mentioned that the topics used on the oral course come from the previous English courses. One of the teachers reported to use an oral test in the end of the course.

Oral exercises used by the teachers in their teaching

The teachers were asked to mark which of the oral exercises listed in the questionnaire they used in lessons. The list included the following exercise types: dialogue, role play, group discussion, pair discussion, presentation, debate, describing a picture, and pronunciation exercises. Apart from one teacher, all the others said they use all of the exercises. The one who did not use them all had left out presentation and describing a picture.

The teachers also had a chance to mention any other additional exercises they use besides those on the list, and they added such activities as preparing an advertisement, presenting oneself, summarizing listening comprehensions, discussing videos, telling jokes, improvisation, acting, and interviewing parents. Many of the exercises the teachers reported using, such as acting, discussion, presentation and role-play, are also listed by Harmer (2001: 271-275) as the most widely used exercise types nowadays.

Oral exercises used the most and the least by the teachers

Discussion exercises were clearly favoured by the teachers, since half of the teachers reported using mostly pair and group discussions in lessons. The other half also used them for the most part but added dialogue, describing a picture and pronunciation exercises to the list as well. Based on the results, it can be said that the teachers know what their students wish to do the most in lessons, and they cater for their needs.

The least used exercises by the teachers were debate, role play, and presentation, even though Harmer (2001: 271-275) lists these exercise types as commonly used ones. These exercises were least used mainly due to the fact that they are offered only on specific courses, whereas the most used exercise types were present at every course, and in nearly every lesson. As mentioned in the student questionnaire results earlier, the students disliked, for example, presentations, and therefore a correlation can also be seen between the exercises the teachers use the least and the ones disliked by the students.

Oral exercises the teachers felt to be the most beneficial in terms of learning, and exercises they liked to offer their students the most

The teachers emphasized the importance of all types of oral exercises and using them as much as possible, since they make students practise also other areas of language competence than just speaking skills. However, the teachers specifically valued exercises which can be executed easily and fast, and which force every student to participate, such as pair discussions. This relates to the issue of productivity, according to which good speaking exercises make every student talk as much as possible (Thornbury 2005: 90). Moreover, they found it important that students learn useful vocabulary and phrases from the exercises, and that the exercises are linked to topics that are meaningful for students or based on real life situations, which relates to the aspect of authenticity of exercises (Thornbury 2005: 91). The following example illustrates this:

Example 22.

"Sellaiset harjoitteet, joissa opiskelija joutuu / saa käyttää itselleen merkityksellisiä asioita hyväkseen. Toisaalta arkielämän tilanteet ovat hyödyllisiä."

"Exercises in which the students have to / get to use topics that are significant for them. On the other hand, situations based on everyday life are useful."

Authenticity and topics related to students' everyday life were key factors also in the exercises the teachers liked to offer their students the most. These aspects are also emphasized in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2012: 24). Furthermore, the teachers mentioned that they either use all of the exercises that are in the course books, or at least they use those exercises as a basis for the ones they give to students, since they found the course material to be good and useful. Pair discussion exercises were also stressed. The following example illustrates the significance of topic choice:

Example 23.

"Harjoituksia, jotka liittyvät jotenkin opiskelijan omaan elämään, ja jotka olisivat hauskoja ja piristäviä ja motivoivia."

"Exercises which have something to do with the students' own lives, and which would be fun, uplifting and motivating."

According to the results, the teachers and the students are on the same wavelength about the most beneficial and most pleasant oral exercises. They both emphasized the significance of topic choice, and valued discussion exercises the most.

Problematic issues affecting teaching speaking skills and ways to solve them

A number of problematic issues concerning teaching oral skills came evident from the answers. Firstly, some students may have low motivation and / or weak oral skills to start with, which may in turn increase motivational problems. The solution to this issue was giving the students positive feedback every now and then, and trying to make the lessons more inspiring, as the following example illustrates:

Example 24.

"Motivaatio joillakin opiskelijoilla matala. Heikko kielitaito peruskoulusta tullessa. Positiivinen palaute ja piristystä tunteihin, että motivoituisivat."

"Some students have low motivation. Weak language skills when coming from comprehensive school. Positive feedback, and inspiring lessons to get them motivated.

Another problem was the difficulty of testing oral skills, and therefore knowing exactly how much the students have improved. This problem was solved by assessing only oral presentations. Evaluation was done by the teachers as well as students as peer feedback. It was also reported that the students usually wish to do exercises with the same partner every time, which could affect their improvement negatively. This issue was handled by switching pairs and groups in order for the students with different skill levels to work with each other, as the following example shows:

Example 25.

"Koska testaaminen on työlästä, testaamme itse asiassa vain suullisia esitelmiä. Opettaja ja ryhmässä olevat opiskelijat arvioivat toisiaan. Paljon toveriarviointia. Vaihtelen pareja ja ryhmiä, jotta eri tasoiset opiskelijat joutuvat tekemisiin toistensa kanssa."

"Since testing takes a lot of effort, we actually test only oral presentations. The teacher and the students in the group evaluate each other. A lot of peer evaluation. I switch pairs and groups to get the students with different skill levels to work with each other."

The students' fear of talking in English, and feelings of anxiety towards it were also seen as problematic. Moreover, the teachers argued that some students just do not want to do the exercises well, and instead sit in lessons doing basically nothing. In these cases the teacher participated in the students' discussions, making sure that they take part in the conversation in the target language. It was seen as crucial for the teachers to not give up on their requirements concerning talking in lessons. The following example illustrates these issues:

Example 26.

"Suurin ongelma on opiskelijoiden korkeahko kynnys uskaltaa avata suunsa. Yleensä menen aina mukaan keskusteluihin, ja siten annan "pientä" painetta niskuroiville" tapauksille. Kun itse ei anna periksi englannin kielen puhumisesta, niin viesti menee mielestäni paremmin perille."

"The greatest problem is the students' fear of opening up their mouths. Usually I participate in the discussions, and give "a little" pressure to slackers. When you yourself do not give up on talking in English, the message gets across better in my opinion."

Another factor causing problems in teaching oral skills was time, which was also mentioned in the findings of Huuskonen and Kähkönen's (2006: 125-141) as well as Tattari's (2001: 54-76) studies. The teachers found that there is simply not enough time on courses to do all the speaking exercises they would like the students to do. Moreover, it was mentioned that sometimes students do not use their time in lessons effectively enough, meaning that they often tend to concentrate on activities which have nothing to do with studying in lessons. This problem was solved by moving in the classroom from one group of students to another, and encouraging them to continue with the oral exercises longer. Furthermore, it was pointed out that teachers need to use their time effectively in lessons, since the amount of work and material on courses is extensive. The following example illustrates time related problems:

> Example 27.
>
> *"Joillain kursseilla ei ole tarpeeksi aikaa tehdä niin paljon suullisia kuin haluaisin. Kaikki oppilaat eivät välttämättä aina käytä aikaansa tehokkaasti. Kiertelen luokassa ja kannustan jatkamaan pidempään. Tehokas ajankäyttö on lukio-opetuksessa tärkeää, koska oppisisältöä ja materiaalia on enemmän, kuin tuntien puitteissa ehditään."*
>
> *"There is not enough time to do as many oral exercises as I would like to on some courses. All of the students do not necessarily always use their time effectively. I move around in the class, and encourage the students to continue longer. Effective use of time is important in upper secondary school education, since there is a lot more course content and material than can be done in lessons."*

Factors that encourage teachers to teach oral skills

The results revealed two significant factors that encourage the teachers to teach speaking skills. First of all, the teachers felt highly motivated to teach oral skills, since they were seen as essential. Tattari's (2001: 54-76) study revealed similar results. Oral skills is the area of language competence that one usually needs the most when having to use a foreign language. Speaking skills were seen as a gateway into widening one's view of the world, and being able to experience new things. One of the teachers felt motivated to teach oral skills due to his own experience of facing the reality of exactly how crucial knowing how to speak is, when he was in teacher training. The following example illustrates his story:

Example 28.

"Suullinen kielitaito tuli minulle vasten kasvoja vasta opeharkassa, ja sen jälkeen olen opetellut oikeastaan puhumaan. Puhuttua kieltä tarvitsee eniten, ja sen tulee olla sitä vastaavassa kunnossa. Kun osaa puhua vierasta kieltä, avautuu maailma aivan erilaisena."

"Oral skills hit me in the face in teacher training, and after that I have been learning to speak. Spoken language is needed the most, and oral skills have to be in an equivalent shape. When you know how to speak a foreign language, the whole world opens up completely differently."

Students' motivation towards learning how to speak was the other relevant factor. The good motivation level of students was also reported by Huuskonen and Kähkönen (2006: 125-141) and by Tattari (2001: 54-76) as having an encouraging impact on teachers. The teachers reported that nearly all students are pleased to do oral exercises, and also students who are not that willing to write anything have to make an effort while performing speaking tasks. The students value oral skills, which in turn keeps even the more weaker students' motivation up. Moreover, the teachers mentioned that it was encouraging for them to see the students improve, and to receive feedback from them. The following example illustrates the aspect of student motivation:

Example 29.

"Kaikki (melkein) tekevät mielellään suullisia harjoituksia. Opiskelijat kokevat sen tärkeäksi. Motivaatio on heikoimmillakin aika korkealla."

"Everybody (almost) is pleased to do oral exercises. The students see it as important. Motivation is quite high even for the weakest students."

The importance of practising oral skills in upper secondary school from the teachers' point of view

All of the teachers thought that practising speaking skills in upper secondary school education is highly important, which was in line with Tattari's (2001: 54-76) and Huuskonen and Kähkönen's (2006: 125-141) findings. Typically this was justified by stating that students need know how to use English in real life, for example in their further studies and at work, either in Finland or abroad. The following example illustrates this issue:

Example 30.

"Lukiolaisen tulee pärjätä opinnoissaan, työssään ja ylipäänsä kaikenlaisissa tilanteissa, joissa kommunikoidaan englannin kielellä (Suomessa, ulkomailla)."

"An upper secondary school student has to be able to cope in his/her studies, work and generally in all sorts of situations in which communication takes place in English (in Finland, abroad)."

The teachers also referred to their own experiences as learners of English, when written language was clearly more valued than the spoken one. It caused them to fear talking, which in turn kept them from improving their oral skills. They do not wish the same scenario happening to their students, and in fact, they are pleased to see that nowadays students are at least a little more willing to talk, even if it has happened on the expense of the more technical knowledge of language. It was also mentioned that even though the teachers valued oral skills, the current form of the matriculation examination forces them to concentrate too much on written language.

The role of oral skills in upper secondary school education nowadays, and the teachers' opinions on it

All of the teachers agreed that the role of oral skills in upper secondary school language education has improved, and nowadays either has an important role or is steadily gaining importance. However, it was mentioned in the answers that the role may vary locally, and from one school to another. Another point worth noting is the effect of the matriculation examination which still underestimates oral skills, and concentrates completely on written language. The following example illustrates these problem points:

Example 31.

"Rooli varmaan vaihtelee paikallisesti. Meillä painotetaan suullista osaamista kursseilla. Valtakunnan tasolla yo-kirjoitukset vievät ehkä joiltakin opiskelijoilta motivaatiota alas, kun ei suullista kielitaitoa testata."

"The role probably varies locally. We emphasize oral skills on courses in our school. On a national level the matriculation examination may decrease some students' motivation, since oral skills are not tested."

The teachers were satisfied with the role of speaking skills in their own teaching but on a wider scale dissatisfaction could be detected. They suggested adding an oral test in the matriculation examination to enhance the role of oral skills on English courses but also recognized the problems concerning sufficient resources to execute the idea. Tattari (2001: 54-76) also reported on the resource problem in her study. Moreover, it was pointed out that improving the status of oral skills by having oral tests may in fact have more negative than positive effects to students' willingness to rehearse speaking. Testing and grading oral skills may create a psychological barrier for students to rehearse speaking, and therefore make speaking even more of a scary issue, as the following example states:

> Example 32.
>
> *"Valitettavasti suullista kielitaitoa aloitettaessa lokeroimaan ja numeroimaan tehdään opiskelijoille juuri se "kynnys", josta pitäisi päästä eroon tai yli."*
>
> *"Unfortunately, when one starts to categorize and grade oral skills the students are set with "a barrier", which should be got rid of or got over."*

5.3 Students' and teachers' views compared

According to the research results, there seems to be a rather good balance between the way the teachers currently teach oral skills, and the way the students wish to study them as well as how they learn the best in their own opinion. Moreover, the students were satisfied with the current amount of different oral exercises offered to them, and with the overall emphasis that oral skills are given on English courses nowadays. The teachers were rather pleased with the current status of speaking skills as well.

In terms of actual speaking exercises, both the students and teachers favoured discussion tasks, and also regarded them as the most beneficial exercises for improving oral skills. Discussion exercises were also the most used ones in lessons. Furthermore, what was perceived as unpleasant or as less useful in terms of learning by the students such as presentation, was also on the bottom of the teachers' list of exercises they used in lessons.

The students raised the importance of topic choice of oral exercises in the study results, and the teachers seemed to note the issue in their answers as well. However, even

though the teachers reported to take up topics that are of interest to young people or somehow relevant in their lives, it could be deduced from the sheer amount of student comments on topic choice that there is still room for improvement in that area. Perhaps the problem is that the teachers have not directly asked their students which sorts of topics they actually prefer. Instead, the teachers may think they already know. The source of the problem could also lie in the course material, if the teachers rely mostly on the oral exercises in the books. Accordingly, if the students find the course material topics boring, they will probably find the exercises boring as well. Christopher, Green and Lam (1997: 135-143) discuss the benefits of allowing students to choose and organize the topics themselves in their article in more detail.

While on the subject of course material, it is worth pointing out that all in all the students felt that their teachers do not offer them that many oral exercises besides the ones in the course books. Therefore, there would be room and even demand for the teachers to get innovative, and for example, create oral exercises around topics which the students have declared as interesting. Teachers could ask their students for opinions on topics to be used in lessons. This would in turn increase student involvement, since students would get a chance to express their views on topic choice, and thus affect the oral exercises used in lessons. Accordingly, giving the students a greater role in planning the exercises, and making them as interesting and pleasant as possible for the students, would undoubtedly have a positive effect on motivation as well.

Another issue which did not match between the students' and teachers' answers was the use of pronunciation exercises. Pronunciation did not receive much emphasis in the teachers' answers, but the students were evidently in need of more pronunciation practice. Perhaps the teachers have grown to support the communicational side of oral skills to an extent that has made them partly forget about native-like pronunciation. Rivers (1981: 188) suggests that some teachers may neglect teaching pronunciation, since it is easier for them to concentrate on analyzing written language. Harmer (2001: 183), on the other hand, points out that teachers may feel that they have enough to do already without having to teach pronunciation as well. Many teachers may also think that it is enough for a person to be understood when speaking English, and thus minor accent flaws are not that serious. Undoubtedly, the students value the communicational approach to teaching oral skills but it is clear that they also wish to sound as good as possible when communicating in a foreign language.

The teachers could also give some consideration to the factors which would make the students rehearse speaking more. The students reported, for example, that future studies and work would affect their motivation to practise more. Therefore, the teachers have a key role in telling their students which occupational and educational fields and branches require a good command of English, and what other types of benefits studying English may have for the students. The teachers can also significantly influence the actual learning environment in lessons, which was another important factor in encouraging the students to rehearse more. The teachers can, for instance, pay special attention to giving supportive feedback to students, and be genuinely enthusiastic about and interested in the subject they teach. Surely the teachers' positive attitude would affect the students in the same way.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to find out which types of oral exercises are used to practise speaking in English lessons, and how students and teachers feel about the current teaching methods, and which exercises they prefer. Furthermore, the status of oral skills in English language teaching, and students' as well as teachers' opinions on it were studied. The method used was controlled study, and the data were gathered using separate questionnaires for students and teachers. 84 students and four teachers participated in the study. The research data was analyzed qualitatively. In this last section I will present a summary of the results in relation to my research questions. Moreover, I will discuss the findings in relation to previous theory and research. Finally, the pros and cons of the current study along with suggestions for further research are presented.

The first aim of the study was to find out which sort of oral practices the students wish to do the most, and which sort of practices do they feel to be the most useful considering learning to speak English better. The vast majority of students reported that discussion exercises were their favourite type of oral task, since 50 students mentioned pair discussion as the most pleasant exercise, and 33 students stated group discussion exercises as their favourite. Discussion exercises were also seen as the most useful ones in terms of developing speaking skills. However, when discussing the usefulness of

exercises, it did not seem to matter to the students whether the discussion is done in pairs or groups, but it has to meet some specific criteria in order to be useful. Firstly, the topics of discussion have to be interesting and relevant to the students and their lives. Secondly, it was seen as important that everyone gets to talk as much as possible during discussions, and has a chance to express their genuine opinions. Thirdly, the students thought it was crucial that the discussion is as free as possible, without too many restricting guidelines concerning the execution of discussion exercises. According to the emphasis the students gave to topic choice of exercises, it can be said that it would be reasonable to give the students a chance to clearly state which sorts of topics are genuinely interesting to them. The teachers could directly ask their students about the topics they wish to use, and thus develop the oral exercises in the desired direction. Using interesting topics and involving the students in the process of designing oral exercises would surely increase their motivation.

Another aim of the study was to find out which sort of oral practices the teachers prefer to give to their students, and which sort of practices do they feel to be the most useful in terms of developing students' speaking skills. Discussion exercises were clearly favoured by the teachers, since half of the teachers reported using mostly pair and group discussions in lessons. Especially pair discussions were favoured, since they require every student to participate. However, in case of the most useful exercises, the teachers emphasized the importance of all types of oral exercises and using them as much as possible, since they make students practise also other areas of language competence than just speaking skills. Moreover, they found it important that students learn useful vocabulary and phrases from the exercises, which may be due to the fact that the Finnish national syllabus for second year upper secondary school learners (B1.2 learners) expect the students to be able to use a quite extensive vocabulary and common idioms (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 240). Furthermore, the teachers reported that the exercises should be linked to topics that are meaningful for students, or based on real life situations.

According to the results it can be said that the teachers and students were on the same wavelength about the ways they wish to teach and learn oral skills, since both participant groups clearly spoke for discussion exercises. However, the students' and teachers' views did not quite meet in the case of pronunciation exercises, since the

teachers reported not to use them a lot, but the students expressed their desire to improve their pronunciation. The reason behind the less significant status of pronunciation in teaching could lie in the national syllabus requirements for B1.2 learners, since it states that comprehensible pronunciation is sufficient at that level of studies (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012: 240). Furthermore, even though the teachers seemed to recognize the importance of topic choice, and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2012) as well as the Finnish national syllabus (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2012) for upper secondary schools require the use of topics that are relevant, interesting and close to students, the students frequently implied a sense of dissatisfaction with the topics used in exercises.

The results of this study had several similarities with previous studies on the same area. The current study revealed that teachers and students in general have a good attitude towards oral skills. Teachers see oral skills as an essentially important part of their teaching, and students' are highly motivated to rehearse speaking, which was reported also by Huuskonen and Kähkönen (2006) as well as Tattari (2001). However, issues such as tight course schedules and the negative impact of the matriculation examination were seen as problems concerning teaching speaking skills, and the same issues rose from Huuskonen and Kähkönen's (2006) and Tattari's (2001) studies. The present study also revealed that teachers feel rather cautious about adding an oral test in the matriculation examination, even though it would raise the significance of oral skills in teaching. Moreover, they mentioned the lack of resources for organizing such tests. These teachers' views were also in line with Tattari's (2001) and Huuskonen and Kähkönen's (2006) findings.

In my opinion this study was able to find answers to its research questions quite well, and the answers I received via the questionnaires were on the point. This study gives new information on a topic that has not previously been studied from the same point of view in Finland, and it succeeded in creating a small overview of the subject.

The downsides of this study mainly relate to the use of questionnaire and the amount of participants. There is always the risk that some people do not answer questionnaires truthfully, which in turn may affect the results. Furthermore, this study was conducted only in the middle and Eastern parts of Finland, and therefore the results cannot be excessively generalized.

Further study could be conducted with a greater number of participating teachers and students from a geographically wider area. Moreover, it would be good to study students' opinions on the topics of oral exercises in order for course books to be developed to a more authentic direction. It would also be worthwhile to study how the status of oral skills in upper secondary school education could be strengthened and improved, and which sorts of procedures it would require.

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APPENDIX 1

KYSELYLOMAKE OPISKELIJOILLE / QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS

Sukupuoli / sex: 1. nainen / female   2. mies / male

1. Millaisia suullisia tehtäviä englannin kielen kurssikirjat tarjoavat? Ympyröi vaihtoehdoista ja lisää tarvittaessa kohtaan i. / Which types of oral exercises English course books offer? Choose from the alternatives, and add your own ones in the alternative i, if needed.

a. dialogi (=vuoropuhelu) / dialogue

b. roolileikit / role play

c. ryhmäkeskustelu / group discussion

d. parikeskustelu / pair discussion

e. esitelmä / presentation

f. väittely / debate

g. kuvasta kertominen / describing a picture

h. ääntämisharjoitukset / pronunciation exercises

i. muita tehtäviä, millaisia? / other exercises, which ones?

_____

2. Mitä suullisia tehtäviä kysymyksessä 1 ympyröimistäsi tehtävistä käytetään tunneilla eniten? / Which of the oral exercises you chose in question 1 are used the most in lessons?

3. Mitä suullisia tehtäviä kysymyksessä 1 ympyröimistäsi tehtävistä käytetään tunneilla vähiten? / Which of the oral exercises you chose in question 1 are used the least in lessons?

4. Millaisia suullisia harjoituksia opettaja tarjoaa kirjoissa olevien tehtävien lisäksi? / Which types of oral exercises does your teacher offer besides the exercises in the course books?

5. Millaiset suulliset harjoitukset koet mieluisimmiksi, ja miksi? / Which types of oral exercises you find most pleasant, and why?

6. Millaiset suulliset harjoitukset koet epämieluisimmiksi, ja miksi? / Which types of oral exercises you find least pleasant, and why?

7. Millaiset suulliset harjoitukset koet hyödyllisimmiksi puhumistaitojen kehittymisen kannalta? / In terms of developing your speaking skills, which oral exercises you find most useful?

8. Millaisia suullisia harjoituksia kaipaisit englannin kursseille? / Which types of oral exercises you would like to add to English courses?

9. Mitkä syyt saisivat sinut harjoittelemaan puhumista enemmän? / Which sorts of reasons would make you rehearse speaking more?

10. Asteikolla 1-4 kuinka paljon mielestäsi englannin opinnoissa lukiossa painotetaan suullista kielitaitoa? Ympyröi vaihtoehdoista. / On a scale of 1-4 how much oral skills are being emphasized in English studies in upper secondary school in your opinion? Choose from the alternatives.

1 Ei ollenkaan/ Not at all 2 Vähän / Little 3 Riittävästi / Sufficiently 4 Liikaa / Too much

APPENDIX 2

KYSELYLOMAKE OPETTAJILLE / QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS

Sukupuoli / sex: 1. nainen / female 2. mies / male

1. Tarjoaako lukionne erityisesti suullisen kielitaidon harjoitteluun tarkoitettuja englannin kielen kursseja? Mikäli tarjoaa, kuvaile kurssin sisältöä lyhyesti. / Does your upper secondary school offer English courses designed specifically to train oral skills? If yes, please describe the contents of the course briefly.

2. Millaisten tehtävien kautta opetat suullista kielitaitoa? Ympyröi vaihtoehdoista ja lisää tarvittaessa omia kohtaan i. / Which types of oral exercises do you use to teach oral skills? Choose from the alternatives, and add more in alternative i, if needed.

a. dialogi / dialogue

b. roolileikit / role play

c. ryhmäkeskustelu / group discussion

d. parikeskustelu / pair discussion

e. esitelmä / presentation

f. väittely / debate

g. kuvasta kertominen / describing a picture

h. ääntämisharjoitukset / pronunciation exercises

i. muita tehtäviä, millaisia? / other exercises, which ones?

_____

3. Mitä suullisia tehtäviä kysymyksessä 2 ympyröimistäsi vaihtoehdoista käytät tunneilla eniten? / Which of the oral exercises you chose in question 2 do you use the most in lessons?

4. Mitä suullisia tehtäviä kysymyksessä 2 ympyröimistäsi vaihtoehdoista käytät tunneilla vähiten? / Which of the oral exercises you chose in question 2 do you use the least in lessons?

5. Millaiset suulliset harjoitukset koet hyödyllisimmiksi opiskelijoiden kielitaidon kehittymisen kannalta, ja miksi? / In terms of developing students' speaking skills, which types of oral exercises do you find most useful, and why?

5a. Millaisia harjoituksia heille mieluiten tarjoat? / Which types of exercises you like to offer them the most?

6. Millaisia ongelmia koet suullisen kielitaidon opettamisessa olevan? / Which sorts of problems you feel there are in teaching oral skills?

6a. Millaisia ratkaisukeinoja sinulla on kohtaamiisi ongelmiin? / Which sorts of solutions you have for those problems?

7. Mitkä seikat kannustavat sinua suullisen kielitaidon opettamiseen? / Which factors encourage you to teach oral skills?

8. Kuvaile omin sanoin, kuinka tärkeää mielestäsi suullisen kielitaidon harjoittelu on lukiossa ja miksi. / Describe in your own words how important in your opinion rehearsing oral skills in upper secondary school is, and why.

9. Millaisen roolin koet suullisen kielitaidon harjoittelulla olevan lukio-opetuksessa, ja miksi? / What sort of a role in your opinion rehearsing oral skills has in upper secondary school education, and why?

9a. Oletko nykyiseen rooliin tyytyväinen? / Are you satisfied with the current role?