

**FINNISH UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE VORTEX OF THE
NEW SYLLABUS:**

Students' views about English oral skills teaching and the inclusion of an oral matriculation exam

Bachelor's thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Suullisen kielitaidon testaaminen on ollut monien vuosien ajan tapetilla suomen lukio-opetuksen parissa. Keskusteluja eri tahojen välillä on käyty tiheään ja varsinkin viime vuosina suullisen kokeen lisääminen osaksi ylioppilastutkintoa on noussut keskeiseksi keskustelunaiheeksi. Tätä prosessia on kiihdyttänyt erityisesti elokuussa 2016 käyttöön otettu uusi opetussuunnitelma, joka vahvasti painottaa tavoitteissaan suullisen kommunikaation taitoja elämän eri osa-alueilla. Suulliselle kielitaidolle on suuri kysyntä työelämässä ja täten kirjallisten taitojen on tehtävä tilaa suulliselle kielitaidolle.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää oppilaiden näkökulmasta, miten englannin kielen suullisen kielitaidon opetus näkyy käytännössä tunneilla uuden opetussuunnitelman näkökulmasta ja mitä ajatuksia oppilailla on tulevaisuudessa toteutettavasta suullisen kielitaidon ylioppilaskokeesta. Oppilaiden henkilökohtaisia asenteita ei ole tällä saralla tutkittu paljon eikä kovin syvällisesti, joten tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus oli saada heidän äänensä kuuluviin.</p> <p>Tutkimukseen osallistui 30 lukion kolmannen vuoden opiskelijaa kahdesta eri lukiosta Suomessa. Tutkimus toteutettiin anonyymina kyselytutkimuksena, joka sisälsi 20 Likert-asteikon kysymystä ja 3 avointa kysymystä. Likert-kysymyksissä vastausvaihtoehdoissa 1 vastasi ”Täysin eri mieltä”-vastausta ja 5 ”Täysin samaa mieltä”-vastausta. Tutkimus toteutettiin tammikuun 2017 lopussa.</p> <p>Tuloksista selvisi, että lukion englannin suullisten harjoitusten määrä on lisääntynyt jonkin verran opetuksessa, mutta tehtävien laatu on vielä alkutekijöissään. Opiskelijat kokivat, että tehtävät eivät ole tarpeeksi haasteellisia eikä niitä oteta tosissaan. Oppilaat painottivat, että suulliseen tuottamiseen ei kannusteta tarpeeksi ja keskustelu on harvoin spontaania tai sovellettua. Suullisesta ylioppilaskokeesta opiskelijoilla oli vaihtelevia mielipiteitä, mutta valtaosa oli skeptisiä joko kokeen toteutuksesta, tasapuolisuudesta tai arvioinnista. Oppilaat kokivat, että suullinen koe voisi olla tarpeellinen, mutta he eivät olleet varmoja palvelisiko se kaiken taseisia opiskelijoita.</p> <p>Näitä tuloksia voidaan käyttää hyödyksi suunnitellessa suullisia oppimissisältöjä lukion kurseille. On myös tärkeää huomioida opiskelijoiden mielipiteet, kun suullista kielitaitokoetta suunnitellaan. Jotta suullinen koe on mahdollinen, on sillä oltava kaikkia opiskelijoita palvelevat arviointikriteerit ja selkeä, rento toteutus.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Oral skills teaching in schools is a topic that has been acknowledged in Finland for years as a vitally important part in the process of language learning and becoming proficient in a language. However, only during the latest years the relevance of teaching oral skills teaching has been recognized and as a result, enhancement of oral skills teaching and students' capabilities to use oral communication effectively has been taken into greater consideration. This change concerns all school levels and especially upper secondary school where the discussions and alterations are moving towards the addition of a oral matriculation exam to the matriculation exams.

The underlying reason for this change lies especially in the renewed syllabus of autumn 2016 that has focused its learning goals around oral proficiency. The addition of oral skills into courses is highly emphasized and so is the importance of surviving with one's language skills in the multilingual and multicultural world. At present, the working life is rapidly changing and demanding multi-skilled professionals who can follow the flow of latest trends that set internationalization, as well as variety of interacting skills as some of the core concepts of effective working life. As companies and their workplaces, as well as schools, are turning towards these global trends, the educational system is pushed to teach and provide the students with these abilities at the same time. Compared to the later years, the focus now is put on the language learning that supports multiple interactional skills (i.e. communicative competence) as well as internationalization skills (Yli-Renko 1989).

Alongside these trends and changes in the syllabus designs has yet again brought up the question of oral matriculation exam as a part of Matriculation Examination (the final exams of upper secondary school). After years of small scale testing with positive results, the Ministry of Education is discussing the possible inclusion of an oral part into the final exams that have previously tested only written skills. However, there is a great deal of obstacles standing in the way of this future change.

Though the present syllabus offers the students with a chance to become more competent in intercultural communication and enhance their oral skills, there is still a lot of uneasiness among students about the use of oral language in the classroom. The Finnish education has been dominated for years by the written and grammatical teaching, pushing aside the importance of oral speech production. This has resulted in the lack of confidence for speaking the language and insufficient usage of communicative competence though oral communication is essential for

future studies and working life. According to the studies by Yli-Renko (1989), several employees indicated that the fear of speaking had persevered through the years and hindered their language selves.

For the educational system to have an oral examination of English as a part of Matriculation Examination, it is essential to add oral courses and tasks into everyday teaching practices. The schools are in a position where they have only a short time to enhance and increase the oral teaching so that it catches up with students' other skills. It is only a matter of time whether these goals can be reached and whether schools can make the new syllabus work as effectively as possible. Nonetheless, more research and tests are needed to improve the teaching and to enhance teachers' creativity as well as the willingness of students to actually produce oral language.

2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

As mentioned above, the role of oral skills is seen as one of the most important aspects of language learning and it is emphasized especially in settings where intercultural communication takes place. As Yli-Renko (1992:1) mentions, intercultural communication is built upon oral communication that aims to provide flexibility and change of attitudes in order to move towards more internationalized views. However, up to this date it has been recognized that oftentimes it is demanding to reach this level of communication among students who have all their life been used to rehearsing their written skills only. Previous research show that the biggest problem lies in the so called '*hidden syllabus*' ideology. (Yli-Renko 1989) Since other areas of studies are time-consuming, neglecting oral skills teaching occurs as a result. Furthermore, this view is often linked with money politics that emphasize that testing oral skills costs an awful lot of money to the government. (Opetusministeriö 2006)

To fix the problem of oral skills teaching and learning, several researchers and the Ministry of Education have tried out diverse types of test batteries for evaluating oral skills in recent years. A study by Yli-Renko (1989) focused on a larger study project that aimed to promote oral skills in foreign languages at the upper secondary school. Its central focus was to create a specific oral test that could determine oral proficiency in different language courses. The test was performed to 228 third-year students from different senior secondary schools in central and southern Finland. The criteria were compiled both from the global oral proficiency scale as well as from the general competences of oral language skills. The testing was performed through oral communication with a native speaker as genuinely as possible. The study found that this kind of method worked out well for the upper secondary school level. It brought such positive results that the possibility of adding an oral part to matriculation examination was seen as a promising choice.

These results were supported by a similar kind of study by Yli-Renko (1992) where a pilot project was conducted to find out ways in which practicing speech communication could be enhanced. The study emphasized that rehearsing speech communication is inevitable all the way to the last years of upper secondary school to provide students with automatized language skills and fluency. These results were answered also by students of which many were strongly in need of strategies that would help them communicate effectively, in other words, they wished continuous routine of oral skills to be added to teaching. (Yli-Renko 1992: 31)

As one perceives teaching from the perspective of oral skills teaching and testing, it needs to

be remembered that education should put more importance on teaching oral skills as much as possible. This should show as routinely exercises on oral skills where the atmosphere of the teaching is encouraging and not focused on the possible grammatical mistakes of a student. Kostiainen (2015) reminds that it is essential to support the students' willingness to speak the language when opportunities are provided for it. She mentions that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) forgets to discuss the importance of boosting students' confidence in their language studies (Kostiainen 2015: 5). In her study, the main results showed that the willingness to communicate was the highest with those students who had practiced their skills on a specific oral course. Moreover, most of these students were significantly more willing to communicate outside the school environment too. (Kostiainen 2015: 40) According to these findings, it can be stated that promoting oral courses could help several Finnish students with their reluctance to speak English. As Kostiainen (2015) further highlights, motivation is usually the starting point of the oral skills.

These perspectives and studies provide us with a notion that the school system ought to enhance the oral skills context in schools and increase the oral skills teaching in the courses. Further, it would be important to change the attitudes towards teaching by presenting the skills as a multidimensional puzzle where all parts are equally important. Further, more focus should be on practicing oral skills where the concentration would be put on communicative competence and fluency to speak, not so much into issues related to it, for example correct pronunciation and grammar. (Kaski-Akhawan 2013: 15)

3 KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

Several models and theories pursue to explain the nature of language learning and the ways with which different competences are developed in an educational context. Although a majority of the models represent and deal with a spectrum of language learning competences, only a minority of them take into consideration the importance of oral skills as one of these competences. Oftentimes the key concepts and theories only scratch the surface of this competence that after all is inevitable in language learning process where becoming fluent and understanding language in real life is important.

From the perspective of the research presented in this paper, it was essential to find theories that would take into consideration both the oral skills context as well as the effect of syllabus design that is the second issue investigated in this research. Therefore, from several theories I chose two that seemed most relevant to my study. The first one was Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) which is a set of guidelines that is primarily used in the language learning in Finnish school system. Secondly, I chose an older model by Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995), a content specified model of communicative competence, which discusses both the relevance of syllabus design to language teaching as well as communicative competence as the “real language use”-competence that is an essential part of reaching language proficiency. The reason for choosing an older model was that it took into consideration the social aspect of oral competence in particular, which is not often emphasized in other theories. Further, it reviewed the importance of syllabus design as an element that can affect the pedagogical aspect of learning. Nevertheless, there are other models that have been key to the field, such as Canale’s and Bachman and Palmer’s language learning theories, but I will not go into them in the frames of this research.

In the following sections, I will discuss the chosen communicative competence theories in more detail. I will discuss their main ideas and aspects. In the last part, I will briefly present the new syllabus with its key points and changes that especially affect language learning and oral skills teaching at school. I will focus on the points that are crucial for this study.

3.1 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (later CEFR) is the set of codes used as primary in the upper secondary school system as a guideline for teaching foreign languages. CEFR is a one of the models for language proficiency, describing the main frameworks that are connected to language teaching and learning. CEFR is a competent model that gives a clear-cut overview to the evaluation of language skills. Linked to this are the general competences that are important in situations where communication is needed. In the next section, I will discuss these competences and how especially communicative competence is introduced according to this model of language proficiency.

In terms of language interaction and production, the general competences in CEFR are represented as skills that represent one's ability to function as a community member. This means that as learner comes across language-related activities, the previous experiences help him to take a part in those situations where language processing is included. In text production, the active strategies of a learner help him to accomplish tasks that are linked to producing and receiving information of specified themes and domains. Alongside the process, the learner modifies his competences constantly and increases his language proficiency. The sum of these strategies enables the development of communicative competence. Related to this is the social context of learning where the learner constructs his communicative competence by experiencing and learning from different languages and cultures. CEFR calls this as 'embracing' language learning. (CEFR 2001: 9)

From the perspective of communication skills, the proficiency of a learner is divided into components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. These consist of 1-2 different subsections that define the specific skill in more detail. According to these, communicative competence is constructed of linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic components. These components include knowledge of the lexical, semantic, grammatical, phonological, orthographical and orthoepic competences (relating symbols to written form and production of correct pronunciation). *Lexical competence* includes the knowledge of using vocabulary, such as fixed expressions, word forms and grammatical elements of language. *Semantic competence* refers to the learner's ability to recognize meaning in a sentence and have control over it. *Grammatical competence* focuses on understanding the grammatical resources of the language, i.e. recognizing the grammatical rules that construct the language. *Phonological competence* is a skill that enables being aware of

sound-units where phonetic features affect the production of language. Furthermore, there is a competence called *orthographic competence* that relates to the symbols used in the written text to represent the language. The ability to produce these symbols with correct pronunciation is known as *orthoepic competence*. (CEFR 2001)

Though the specified competences presented above give a clear-cut understanding of language processing, it must be noted that language learning is also social phenomenon where the linguistic resources of a language may vary within cultures, contexts and the function of communication. The sociocultural conventions of language often cover specific norms that communication has among diverse cultures in e.g. politeness, humor, social status etc. It is important to be aware of these principles in interactional settings.

3.2 Content-specified model of communicative competence

Oral language teaching has been approached from the perspective of communicative competence for years, which have given the present guidelines for the language teaching, and that of communication, in schools. However, in the syllabus creation process there has not been enough specification of the factors that ought to be added to the actual communicative competence learning design. In other words, for a lengthy period, syllabus structures from this point have not been content-driven enough. (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell 1995: 6) Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) delved into this idea and considered that the needed change was the aspect of pedagogical conversion to the language learning process. Therefore, they proposed their communicative competence model to make a distinction to the two already existing models of communicative competence that had largely dominated the field: the communicative competence models of Canale (1983) and Bachman & Palmer (1990).

Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) content-specified model of communicative competence proposes their own modified model that takes into consideration the syllabus design and pedagogical element of communicative competence. In this model, they introduce five components of the language that construct communicative competence: (1) discourse competence, (2) linguistic competence, (3) actional competence, (4) sociocultural competence, and (5) strategic competence. (Celce-Murcia et al. 1995: 5) With *Discourse competence*, they refer to selection as well as the sequencing of words and sentences to reach a unified level of knowledge in written and spoken text. Related to these are for example cohesion, deixis and coherence that shape the

conversational structure of communication when two people are taking turns talking. *Linguistic competence* then considers the basic structure of communication that relies on morphological inflections, sentence patterns/types and other lexical resources. *Actional competence*, the new, modified competence that stands out of normal selection, refers to learner's skills to understand and convey communicative intent, which in other words means putting together the actional intent with the linguistic forms of language. This is what Celce-Murcia et al. describe as '**interlanguage pragmatics**', i.e. what actually happens and what is meant in speech acts. Few dimensions of actional competence are e.g. interpersonal exchange and information sharing. *Sociocultural competence* is about learner's ability to express messages to other participants within the social and cultural context of actual language use. Lastly, *strategic competence* of this model refers to the basic knowledge of using communication strategies, e.g. planning, cooperativeness and compensation. (Celce-Murcia et al. 1995: 13-29)

In this model of communicative competence, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) primarily focus on bringing more emphasis to the sociocultural aspect of learning. Since the two earlier models focused on differentiating this aspect from both strategic and discourse competence and moving its idea more towards sociolinguistic approach, they saw it evident to distinguish themselves from this thinking and introduce the "sociocultural" competence instead (Celce-Murcia et al. 1995: 11). This was to make a clear-cut distinction to another aspect in their model, actional competence.

Lastly, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995:13) see it necessary that the communicative competence is more than just language's strategic elements. The pedagogical approach to teaching in their opinion enhances the description of speech acts and the function of language. They believe in the distinction of lexical knowledge as well as grammatical knowledge. This in other words means that the best way to convey meaning-making in a language is through actual language use which is closely related to one's repertoire of conventionalized phrases and routines in spoken interaction.

3.3 English oral skills learning in new syllabus

The Ministry of Education in Finland published the new syllabus design for upper secondary schools in June 11, 2015 (Opetushallitus 2015). This syllabus was taken into operation in August

2016 with its primary focus on the enhancement and increase of “dialogicality”, i.e. oral skills in teaching.

The most relevant focus points of the new syllabus are in the multiformity of learning. The learning goals of LOPS support both the theme of internationality as well as English oral skills as a way of communication in those international contexts. (Opetushallitus 2015: 116) This places importance on the global, national as well as local participation in society and the way in which English language is delved into it.

What has critically changed from the previous syllabus is the emphasis that is placed on the importance of oral skills. All the obligatory courses have oral skills as one of their major goals that supports efficiently the development of international, cultural language self. The syllabus introduces these oral skills as such:

The student is expected to recognize different needs of communication and build his/her identity as an active English speaker in various interaction-focused situations. Further he is to build his part in active communication and be able to go through meaning-making negotiations in the given language. This is linked to the ability to express himself and his opinions through the continuum of English.
(Opetushallitus 2015: 116-117, originally in Finnish)

However, what needs to be noted is that the advanced courses for English studies are the only ones that focus most of all to the production, integration and development of oral skills. One added feature to these is the possibility of oral skills aspects to be inserted to any part of the other courses listed in the syllabus.

4 THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of this study was to investigate upper secondary school students' views about the change of syllabus from the perspective of oral skills teaching and find out students' ideas of possible oral matriculation. Previous research have shown the relevance of oral skills in teaching and have seen the importance of practicing them routinely. Though several oral exam test batteries have been tested to indicate that including an oral exam could be possible in the upper secondary school level, there has not been much research how students actually feel about the idea. The researches have merely scratched the surface of students' opinions, but have not gone deeper into them from the viewpoint of oral skills. Due to this, I was interested in finding out how well the new, oral competence-centered syllabus works in practice and how students actually feel about the phenomenon of oral proficiency and oral exams. I wanted to find out their opinions in a larger scale: How do they react to this change? Are the oral skills teaching on a level that can welcome oral tests? To find answers to these questions, my research questions were set under two focus themes:

1. **The perspective of oral skills in upper secondary school**

1.1 *What are the students' perception of oral skills and its teaching at the upper secondary school level?*

1.2 *Do students understand the relevance of oral skills and the aims of present syllabus?*

2. **The perspective of oral matriculation exam**

2.1 *What are students' views on the addition of an oral exam in general?*

2.2 *What advantages or disadvantages do students see in the oral matriculation exam?*

My expectation for the results was that students would have a range of ideas towards both perspectives. Oral skills would be seen as relevant and students would feel rather positive about oral skills teaching in general. However, I assumed that some of the students would be concerned of reaching the same level of proficiency as in written skills. They would show worry towards the workability of an oral exam and criticize the lack of oral skills teaching. In the next part, I will discuss the participants of this study and the methods of data collection.

5 METHODS

In the following sections, I will discuss the methods in more detail. I will include information about the participants of my study and the way the data was gathered. Further, I will exemplify the methods applied in general and discuss the method of analysis in the end.

5.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 30, third year upper secondary school students from two upper secondary schools in Finland. The first school was located in the central Finland and the other one in Western Finland. Both schools were middle-sized and the ages between participants ranged from 18 to 19. I chose third year students as my target group because they are the furthest in their English studies and the closest to the matriculation exams. At this age, the students could be expected to have a more extensive idea of their studies and syllabus. Hereby, one could assume that they are mature enough to evaluate their oral skills and the oral skills teaching in particular.

Though both groups had been introduced to the new syllabus design in their English studies, there were two notions that made a distinction between the groups. Firstly, group one had been studying with the program longer than the other had. Group one had studied with the new syllabus right from the start of August 2016, as group two had started with the new syllabus in spring term 2017 and had still some other English studies completed with the old syllabus design. Secondly, considering the students in group one, none of them had chosen to take the oral course (course 8) in their studies. These were important notions that I took into consideration when analyzing the results of the research.

5.2 Data collection

For this study, I collected my data by using a quantitative method and gathered the information through an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 20 varying Likert-scale questions and three open questions. The survey was conducted in Finnish and it was completely anonymous. The three open questions provided students with a chance to elaborate on their

answers in more detail. I chose an online questionnaire due to its simplistic nature that allows one to ask several things at the same time. Further, it seemed the most suitable way to collect a quantitative data for this kind of thesis topic. Adding up a few open questions helped to analyze the multiple choice-questions: it revealed deeper knowledge and frameworks of the students' attitudes towards the topics. The questionnaire form can be found in the appendix.

5.3 The method of analysis

Both the Likert scale and open questions were a compilation of my own questions. When compiling the questions, my idea was to build up themes that would bring both positive as well as negative sides of oral skills teaching into the answers. The themes were thought through the oral proficiency aspects listed in CEFR. The focus was to enlighten the actual ideas about oral language skills and their usage from the perspective of upper secondary school students.

Considering the reliability issue, no reliability tests were done in the frames of this work. The reason for this was that the methodological choices and the interpretation sections of the research were mostly qualitative. In addition, the aim of this research was not compare the different numerical Likert-scale answers of different subcategories together and then claim that one subcategory differs from the other in some sense. If the aim had been to compare, then statistical significance would have been considered.

For further representation of results, basic percentage distributions and clearest differences were brought up. As this study was done in a minor scale, an excessive numerical analysis was not done. Therefore, I focused on presenting the percentual figures of the results with which I was able to show the main distribution of the answers. For the qualitative part of analysis, specific themes were chosen for deeper investigation. These were e.g. repetitive views among students, contradictory views to some other question and notable differences that were against the hypotheses. A few other themes were found from the results, but they were mentioned only briefly.

6 RESULTS

In this section, I will present the results one by one according to the research questions, first giving a more general view to the results and then moving on to the most important findings. The analysis of the results will focus on the themes that have been chosen for closer exploring: repetitive views on oral skills teaching among students (whether positive or negative), contradictory views between questions that relate to one another, views that are stereotypical or out of ordinary and views that are against the hypotheses. Few other themes, for example distrust to the capabilities of teachers, can be found from the results also, but I will not go deeper into them in here.

6.1 Students' perception of oral skills and its teaching at the upper secondary school

The students' views on the oral skills teaching in upper secondary school were mostly positive. 50 % of the participants agreed that the amount of oral skills teaching had increased in their studies and more than a half thought that the oral skills exercises in the class had increased. However, there were some differences and contradictory thoughts between the answers about the versatility and difficulty of exercises. Though merely half of the class agreed that the tasks were multifaceted enough, in the open answers the reception showed strong contradiction to this answer. A frequent view was that there is not enough oral skills teaching in the classes and that the tasks often do not challenge students' thinking. Furthermore, several students noted that oral skills tasks are not taken seriously enough and there is not enough encouragement for producing oral language and the spoken situations are not given the attention they would deserve.

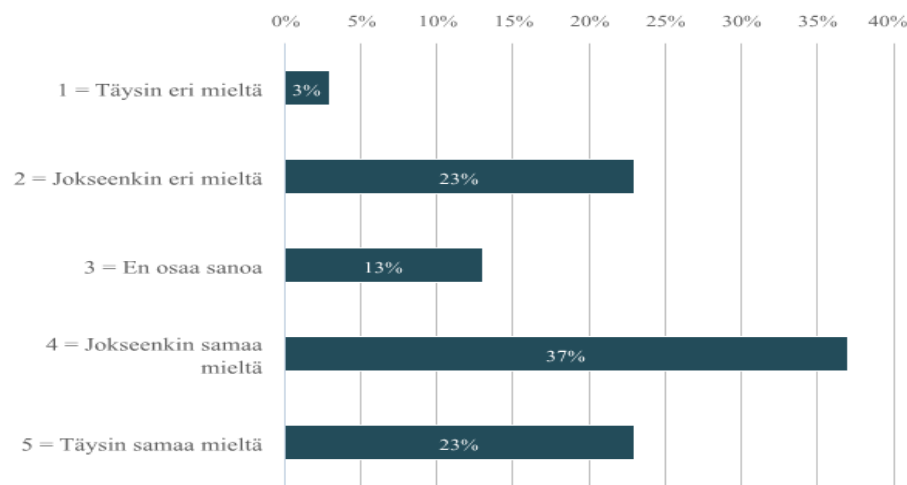
In the question 6, over half of the students answered that they somewhat agreed with this statement. However, yet again the things students mentioned in the open question section contradicted with their ready alternatives. Here is an opinion by one student in the open question:

Example 1

"Usually the tasks are that we just read the sentences and words aloud. Rarely there are exercises where you could produce the sentences by yourself. For me it would be important that there were tasks where you could produce the sentences by yourself, because it is a totally different thing than by just repeating words and sentences from a paper." (Translation from Finnish by Kati Nappa)

This example is striking as it clearly shows that the standards of upper secondary school level are not reached, since one of the core learning goals of new syllabus is to produce oral language effectively and be able to discuss your thoughts orally. If the tasks are on too low a level and students are not given enough opportunities to enhance their oral proficiency, an increased unwillingness to learn oral skills may occur. Producing and speaking the language is essential aspect of oral proficiency and therefore it ought to be encouraged to the maximum.

Table 1 Oral skills tasks are versatile and challenge the students to enhance their skills



To go back to the opinions on the versatility of oral exercises, a few other contradicting results occurred when comparing the Likert question and the answers in open question. Question 4 (See Table 1) showed that 37 % of the answers were in the “*Somewhat agree*” section and 23 % to the “*Completely agree*” section. Having answered this, however, many students contributed to the open question with quite opposite views. A few examples of these views were that students felt that the exercises done on the lesson were not challenging enough, the tasks include only reading grammatical rules out loud, the students are not encouraged to put effort to the oral tasks and most of the tasks are not checked together to make sure everyone has understood the concepts. In addition, many were concerned about the fact that students are not actually encouraged to produce oral language spontaneously as the set of answers and sentences are given to them automatically from the book. In other words, oral skills do not develop since all the topics are prematurely pointed to the students. This adds up to the concern of whether the syllabus is

actually working in practice as students seem not to gain enough practice to produce or even upgrade their skills actively.

As last, when the students were asked how much they use oral English on a regular basis, 40% agreed to speak oral English weekly or every now and then. Only a minority of students said they use oral English on a daily basis. Furthermore, most of the students, as expected, used English mostly in school. Nevertheless, surprising was that over 60 % said to use English “In another context” which is positive. Nevertheless, if the oral competence is not strengthened in school where most of the learning happens, the chance of effective progress in oral skills is slow.

6.2 The relevance of oral skills and knowledge on the present syllabus

Since the new syllabus has been released and taken into operation only recently, it was expected that most of the students would be unaware of the aims of new syllabus, considering the oral skills teaching. This came evident as more than 60 % of the students did not know anything about the set of learning goals presented in the new syllabus. However, positively enough, 30 % of the students had heard of the aims of new syllabus. Considering the relevance of oral proficiency, 83% of the students supported that oral skills are very important from the perspective of their future studies and working life. This alone is a step in a good direction and it might make possible the students’ will to demand more varying exercises.

In the next two sections, I will present the results of the second part of my study, students’ views on the inclusion of an English oral matriculation exam.

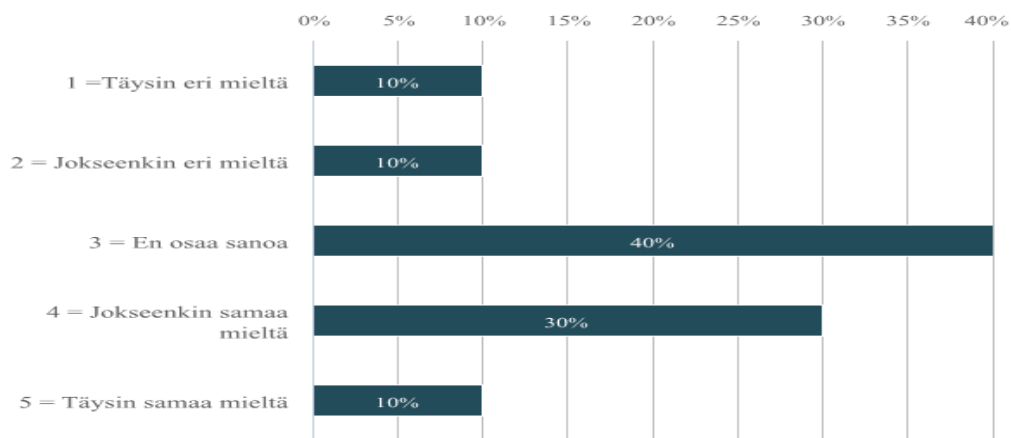
6.3 Students’ views on the inclusion of an oral matriculation exam

In general terms, the views in this section varied more greatly than in the first part of the research. Students’ views showed both positive and negative attitudes towards the addition of an oral exam as well as general skepticism of its usefulness. Other interesting findings were that students seemed to have little trust in the equality of the oral exam and they seemed to believe strongly in some out of date ideas about language skills testing.

Focusing on the main views on the addition of an oral matriculation exam, the answers varied mostly between “Completely agree” and “I don’t know”. Most of the answers were on the “I

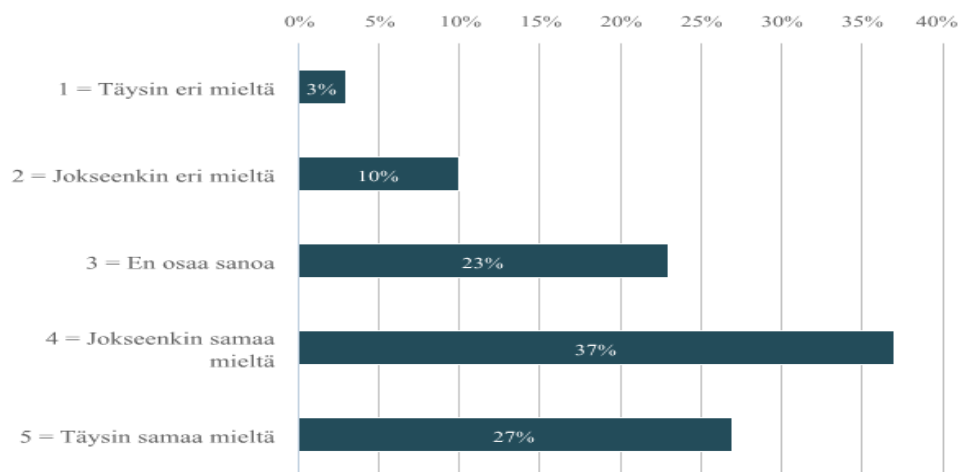
don't know"- alternative than in any other option in all questions. This indicates noticeably that this new possible change is rather unfamiliar for the students and the sudden appearance of it seems illogical or difficult to think of, considering the matriculation exams at present. These views followed especially the question "*My feelings towards the addition of an oral exam are mostly positive*", in which almost half of the students answered, "I don't know". Despite the answer rates in these, more than half of the students still saw the testing of oral skills as important.

Table 2. *My feelings towards the addition of an oral exam are mostly positive*



According to the question number 14, "*My feelings towards the addition of an oral exam are mostly positive*", students shared a wide range of feelings. Most of the students contributed to "*Somewhat agree*" or "*I don't know*", but other opinions received some answers too (See Table 2.) However, repetitively, several students had doubts about the exam itself. This was clearly seen in the open-ended question where several students brought up the problematicness of the exam situation as well as its evaluation. In the phrasing of these answers, it could be seen that some sort of "urban legends" of teaching dominated the views of students. For example, some of the students contributed the evaluation to be difficult, if even impossible since Finns are well-known from their bad pronunciation and grammar, referred as '*rallienglanti*' (rally English).

Table 3. It is as important to test English oral skills as well as written skills



Linked to the previous question (question 14), another aspect worthy of mentioning is the contradiction between the problematicness of the exam situation and its commissioning according to students. What put more emphasis on this was also students' general view on the importance of carrying out an oral matriculation examination. Question 16, which specifically addressed this, pointed out the contradiction clearly. In this, 37% of the students somewhat agreed to this statement and 27% completely agreed (See Table 3). Though the view here is not unexpected, the answers in open questions raise a thought whether the knowledge of the students is accurate about the commissioning of the exam: whether they have ever been told about how tests of this kind work out. This shows in the open questions as students claiming that evaluating oral skills is barely possible due to the stressful atmosphere of it and the evaluation is difficult because it is not equal to all due to different learner levels. Moreover, some students said that in an oral test it might be possible for a student to bypass the actual formal criteria of the exam by using specific expressions that are similar to academic style but not academic enough. In this way, the students saw that the test would not be fair or it could not be applied. This is an interesting notion from the student's side, as often the spoken interaction in this school level (especially in the oral courses) does not need to match strict academic principles but the idea is more in producing the language and expressing one's thoughts and ideas through oral production.

6.4 Students' views on the advantages or disadvantages of the oral matriculation exam

From the perspective of advantages and disadvantages of an oral matriculation exam, students had both negative and positive responses in their answers. In the open questions, some of the students contributed that the addition of an oral exam is not easy as it is difficult to examine one's oral skills in a proper manner. Further, an exam-like situation might increase stress levels and students may not succeed as well as they could. Due to this, the students wished for a kind of an exam that would exclude the "examination-like" atmosphere and offer a more relaxed environment. However, alongside this some students questioned the equality of the exam from the perspective of different levels of proficiency among students.

From the negative point of view, 10% felt that the exam would not be useful at all. In many questions, students were unaware whether they would say the addition to be a burden or not. The amount of "I don't know"-answers was more than expected, varying from 20 to 30%. This indicates that the educational system has a long way to go before the exam could be carried out properly on this school level and they need to increase knowledge among students about this new change is their near future.

Important to the things mentioned above was that half of the students *emphasized* that the relaxed and encouraging atmosphere of teaching and learning oral skills plays a key role in the succession of an oral matriculation exam. Also, almost half of the students agreed that oral skills teaching and learning ought to be started on the earlier school stages in order for the students to succeed better later on in the oral matriculation exam. One student effectively put his opinion like this:

Example 2

" Right from the elementary school, the teaching should center on speaking skills; if someone doesn't keep up so easily, then extra help should be offered but that also needs to be relaxed and encouraging. If speaking English is really stressful right from the start and it is fearsome like in lion's den, it kills the motivation and you don't even want to learn to speak it." (Translation from Finnish by Kati Nappa)

Having looked deeper into results, it can be noticed that some of my hypotheses came true, but most of them in a more specified manner. Students had versatile ideas of the oral exams as well

as the oral skills teaching in general. However, an unexpected element was the amount of different “urban legends” of oral language teaching that were still strongly stuck to the heads of students. For future, the school system should focus on enhancing the atmosphere of oral skills in a classroom and turn the tide in a positive direction where these answers of students would be heard, the situation would be taken seriously and actions would be taken to ensure effective oral skills learning in future.

7 DISCUSSION

The main aim of this study was to investigate the views and opinions of third-year upper secondary school students about the change of syllabus from the perspective of oral skills and oral skills teaching. The other aim was to provide fresh views of students considering the possible inclusion of an English oral matriculation exam. My wish was to find out whether their opinions and views would support the increase of oral skills teaching in class, which has been the core aim of the new syllabus. Further, I wanted to find out their reception to the change of matriculation exams. As this research revealed, the teaching of oral skills teaching in upper secondary school has come to a point where the amount and good quality of oral skills has not entirely kept up with the sudden changes of syllabus that strive for oral communication to be used extensively in students' studies. Progress has been made but the ideal amount of oral exercises and creative teaching that is emphasized in the syllabus has not yet met with reality and is still under construction.

This research showed that students were mostly unanimous about the lack of authenticity in oral skills teaching and the successfulness of it. Several students pointed out clearly that the willingness to talk is heavily connected to the atmosphere in class and the style in which exercises are done: most of the students criticized the lack of challenge and encouragement in spoken exercises and the lack of spontaneous interaction. What came to the addition of oral matriculation exam, the students saw it as difficult to implement to the system and they criticized both the evaluation and equality of the exam. Though they were mostly positive about the possible change, they still contributed to have little trust in its successfulness. Further, they doubted their own skills to an extent where they saw that stressful, exam-like situation would hinder their actual performance and give a false image of their competence. It is not hard to see where these views arise from since for years the dominance has been on the grammatical side of learning and especially in the grammatical correctness of language. (Kankaansyrjä, Nyman & Piippo 2006: 122) Many students strongly believe in the attitudes that they have been around for long; the performance of a student is evaluated through written production. Due to this, there is not (at least not yet) much room for other ways of evaluation for them, and further, many are not familiar with evaluation based on oral skills.

The aforementioned views represent the kind of 'urban legends' of language learning, but it does not mean that these views are wrong or ridiculous. Rather they should be important

indicators to future action. Since for several Finnish students' oral communication proves to be the hardest and less-proficient competence among the other competences, it needs to be made self-evident to rehearse oral skills actively throughout the years and it should be given as much importance as to written skills. The teachers should create an atmosphere where learning oral skills would come naturally and where it would not be strictly defined always. After all, these students are interested in numerous matters of life of which they have a lot to say about. Therefore, the teaching should focus on bringing these ideas of students into the class and encourage more spontaneous communicative situations where mistakes are not seen as a threat to the language learning. The lessons should include more themes that are most important to this age group and not tied to the book.

Further ado, the educational system of upper secondary schools should invest in sharing information about the present syllabus and the structuration, evaluation and production of oral exams that have been carried out successfully in the recent years by several researchers (See e.g. Yli-Renko 1989, 1992). The stereotypical ideas about language teaching should be weeded out with these questions in mind: What are the things that keep these old attitudes alive and what especially needs to be changed? The later researches could focus on answering these questions and enabling the oral matriculation exam. It is high time for these oral skills exams to be tested in a larger scale to detect problems, possibilities and resources.

There are also other possible ways to help the situation. The basis of them all is in the multiformity of learning that the whole syllabus relies on. For this idea to work, the schools need to be ready for several actions. These could include e.g. offering more (*obligatory*) oral courses or oral communication packages for students, educating teachers how to seize oral skills teaching and the encouraging atmosphere, trials for oral exam batteries on an upper secondary school scale and welcoming new strategies. Moreover, it should be encouraged and made possible to take the oral skills learned at school outside the school environment. Municipalities could build a continuum of oral skills learning for all citizens: courses, groups, summer schools, workplace workshops, etc. This would enhance the situation on all societal levels. Further, in upper secondary school as well as in lower and higher school levels, students should have a chance to have their applied skills of language learning evaluated. Many learn languages and oral skills outside school for example in hobbies, gaming, among friends, in clubs and so on. It is inevitable to broaden the scope of language learning and learn to see the spectrum of learning strategies that

each individual possesses.

However, it is only for time to show how the future will evolve. There are still many limitations and problems that stand in the way of effective progress of adding oral skills into schools and to society. It might even be the case that the addition of oral matriculation exam is something that cannot possibly be taken into operation due to lack of resources and the problems in money economy. Whatever the future may bring, the matters mentioned above and the important opinions of students themselves should not be forgotten.

As last, one must note that this research was done on a small scale and therefore the results cannot be overgeneralized or seen to represent the opinions of all upper secondary school students in Finland. Regional differences, the course selection, schools' emphasis on specific subjects and resources of every school might vary greatly and affect the perception. However, on a larger scale it can be assumed that the lack of oral skills teaching is still persevering, considering the previous research and the impact of this problem on the working life.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: The structure of the questionnaire

Englannin suullinen kielitaito lukiossa

Tervetuloa vastaamaan kyselyyn, joka koskee englannin kielen suullisen kielitaidon opetusta ja opiskelua lukiossa ja englannin suullisen ylioppilaskokeen lisäämistä osaksi ylioppilastutkintoa. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on kerätä lukion kolmannen vuoden opiskelijoiden näkemyksiä koskien näitä kahta teemaa.

Kysely sisältää 23 väittämää/kysymystä, joista kolme on avoimia kysymyksiä. Vastatessasi valitse aina vaihtoehto, joka kuvastaa sinun näkemystäsi parhaiten tai se vaihtoehto, joka tuntuu lähinnä sopivimmalta. Vastaathan kysymyksiin totuudenmukaisesti ja lue kysymykset huolella. Vastaaminen vie noin 10–15 minuuttia.

Kysely täytetään anonyyminä. Ainoastaan sukupuoli kartoitetaan mahdollista vertailua varten. Antamiasi vastauksia käsitellään luottamuksellisesti ja säilytetään Jyväskylän yliopiston salatulla palvelimella.

ESITIEDOT: sukupuoli

Olen

nainen

mies

en halua määritellä

muu

OSIO I: Englannin kielen suullisen kielitaidon opetus lukiossa

Tässä osiossa (12 kysymystä) esitän väittämiä ja kysymyksiä, jotka koskevat suullisen kielitaidon opetusta ja opiskelua lukiossa nykyisen opetussuunnitelman mukaisesti. Kysymyksiin sisältyy myös oman taitotasosi arviointia. Vastatessasi kysymyksiin pidä koko ajan mielessä tämänhetkinen opetus sekä oppimisesi ja vastaa näkemyksesi mukaan.

Valitse alla olevien väittämien kohdalla se vaihtoehto, joka kuvaa parhaiten tämänhetkistä tilannetta ja näkemystäsi asiasta asteikolla 1-5, jossa 1 = Täysin eri mieltä, 2 =Jokseenkin eri mieltä, 3 = En osaa sanoa, 4 =Jokseenkin samaa mieltä, 5 = Täysin samaa mieltä.

	1= Täysin eri mieltä	2= Jokseenkin eri mieltä	3= En osaa sanoa	4= Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	5= Täysin samaa mieltä
1 Englannin suullisen kielitaidon opettamisen määrä on lisääntynyt.					
2 Tunneilla tehtävät harjoitukset sisältävät enemmän suullisen kielitaidon harjoituksia kuin aiemmin.					
3 Suullisen kielitaidon harjoitukset ovat monipuolisia ja haastavat oppilaita tarpeeksi kehittämään kielitaitoaan.					
4 Suullista kielitaidon opetusta tarjotaan tarpeeksi, esimerkiksi erilaisilla kursseilla.					
5 Tunneilla kannustetaan suullisen kielitaidon käyttöön ja ilmapiiri siihen on rento.					
6 Suullisen kielitaidon harjoitukset ovat vaatimustasoltaan lukio-osaamisen tasolla.					

7. Jos vastasit johonkin edellä mainituista väittämistä 1 = Täysin eri mieltä tai 2 = Jokseenkin eri mieltä, kerro tarkemmin, miksi (esim. miten tilanne on tällä hetkellä tai

ilmeneekö puutteita?)

--

	(1) En koskaan	(2) Harvoin	(3) Silloin tällöin	(4) Viikoittain	(5) Päivittäin
8 Käytän suullista englantia...					

	Koulussa	Kotona	Harrastuksissa	Ystävien kanssa	Muussa yhteydessä
9 Käytän suullista kielitaitoani...					

10 Miten arvioisit omaa englannin kielen suullista kielitaitoasi?

Englannin suullinen kielitaitoni on erittäin sujuvaa ja minulla ei ole juurikaan ongelmia sen tuottamisessa. Puhun englantia mielelläni niin luokassa kuin vapaa-ajallakin.

Englannin suullinen kielitaitoni on perushyvää ja tuotan sitä suht ongelmitta. Puhun sitä ajoittain mielelläni, joskus käytän sitä myös vapaa-ajallani.

Englannin suullinen kielitaitoni on kohtalaista/tydyttävää, mutta tuottamisessa ja puhumisessa on usein ongelmia. En puhu sitä mielelläni muuta kuin tarpeen vaatiessa.

Englannin suullinen kielitaitoni on huonoa, minulla ei ole juurikaan taitoja puhua tai tuottaa sitä. En nauti englannin puhumisesta ja pelkään tilanteita, joissa minun pitää käyttää sitä.

	Kyllä	Vain osittain	En
11 Olen tietoinen uuden opetussuunnitelman sisältämistä oppimistavoitteista koskien englannin suullista kielitaitoa.			
12 Näen englannin suullisen kielitaidon kehittämisen/harjoittelun relevanttina tulevaisuuden opintojen ja työelämän kannalta.			

OSIO II: Englannin kielen suullinen koe osana ylioppilaskoetta

Seuraavissa kysymyksissä (11 kysymystä) esitetään väittämiä, jotka koskevat englannin suullisen ylioppilaskokeen lisäämistä osaksi ylioppilaskokeita. Kysymykset kartoittavat sinun mielipiteitäsi koskien muun muassa suullisen kokeen lisäämistä ja sen hyödyllisyyttä sekä yleisiä tuntemuksiasi asiasta. Kysymykset sisältävät myös väittämiä suullisen kokeen vaikutuksesta opetukseen yleisesti. Vastatessasi kysymyksiin, koita kuvitella suullisen kokeen lisäämistä osaksi ylioppilaskoetta tällä hetkellä ja vastaa näkemyksesi mukaisesti.

Valitse alla olevien väittämien kohdalla se vaihtoehto, joka kuvaa parhaiten näkemystäsi asiasta asteikolla 1-5, jossa 1 = Täysin eri mieltä, 2 = Jokseenkin eri mieltä, 3 = En osaa sanoa, 4 = Jokseenkin samaa mieltä, 5 = Täysin samaa mieltä.

	1= Täysin eri mieltä	2= Jokseenkin eri mieltä	3= En osaa sanoa	4= Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	5= Täysin samaa mieltä
13 Suullisen kokeen lisääminen osaksi ylioppilaskoetta on tarpeellista.					
14 Minulla on enimmäkseen positiivisia ajatuksia koskien suullisen kokeen lisäämistä.					
15 Pärjäisin hyvin nykyisillä taidoillani suullisessa ylioppilaskokeessa.					
16 Suullista kielitaitoa on yhtä tärkeitä testata kuin kirjallisiakin taitoja.					
17 Suullisen kokeen arvosanasta on hyötyä tulevaisuudessa niin opiskelussa kuin työelämässä.					

18 Jos vastasit joihinkin edeltävistä kysymyksistä 1 = Täysin eri mieltä tai 2 = Jokseenkin eri mieltä, perustele miksi (esim. vaikuttaako jokin asia erityisesti suhtautumiseesi?)

	(1) Täysin eri mieltä	(2) Jokseenkin eri mieltä	(3) En osaa sanoa	(4) Jokseenkin samaa mieltä	(5) Täysin samaa mieltä
19 Suullisen ylioppilaskokeen lisäämisestä olisi enemmän haittaa kuin hyötyä.					
20 Suullisen kokeen lisääminen ei ole järkevää, sillä se lisää opiskelijoiden työmäärää liikaa.					
21 Suullisesta ylioppilaskokeesta ei ole hyötyä, jos suullisen kielitaidon harjoittaminen ei tapahdu kannustavassa ilmapiirissä ja opetus ei ole tarpeeksi aktiivista.					
22 Suullisessa ylioppilaskokeessa pärjääminen vaatisi aktiivisempaa suullisen kielitaidon opiskelua jo aiemmilla luokka-asteilla.					

21 Jos vastasit joihinkin edeltävistä kysymyksistä, 5 = Täysin samaa mieltä tai 4 = Jokseenkin samaa mieltä, niin miten mielestäsi opetukseen on muututtava, jotta suullisesta ylioppilaskokeesta olisi hyötyä?

Kiitos vastauksistasi!

Appendix 2: Student consent- form

Upper secondary school students in the vortex of new syllabus: students' views and thoughts about English oral skills teaching and the addition of a matriculation oral exam

LIITE 1: TIEDOTE TUTKITTAVILLE JA SUOSTUMUS TUTKIMUKSEEN OSALLISTUMISESTA

Tutkijoiden yhteystiedot

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Tutkimuksen taustatiedot

Kyseinen tutkimus tehdään Jyväskylän yliopistossa, humanistisissa tieteissä kielten laitoksella.

Tutkimus toteutetaan yksittäisenä tutkimuksena eikä se ole osa laajempaa tutkimusprojektia. Työ on kandidaatintutkielma ja sen valmistumisajankohta on huhti-toukokuussa 2017. Tutkimus toteutetaan virallisesti tammikuun 2017 loppupuolella. Tutkimuksella ei ole rahoitusta.

Tutkimuksen tarkoitus, tavoite ja merkitys

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää lukio-opiskelijoiden ajatuksia ja näkemyksiä koskien englannin suullisen kielitaidon opetusta uuden opetussuunnitelman näkökulmasta. Toinen tavoite on saada tietoutta opiskelijoiden ajatuksista koskien tulevaisuudessa lisättävää englannin suullista ylioppilaskoetta. Aiemmat tutkimukset ovat nostaneet esille vieraiden kielten suullisen kielitaidon merkittävyyden yleisesti koulutuksellisella tasolla ja vahvistaneet suullisen kielitaidon osaamisen tärkeyden. Opetushallitus on monina vuosina testauttanut erilaisia suullisen kielitaidon kokeita arvioidakseen mahdollisen suullisen kielitaitokokeen lisäämistä osaksi ylioppilaskoetta.

Uusimman tiedon mukaan tätä muutosta ollaan tekemässä ja sen vuoksi myös uudessa opetussuunnitelmassa dialogisuuden ja suullisen kielitaidon harjoittamisen lisääminen ovat nousseet päätavoitteiksi. Tällainen ylioppilaskoeuudistus ja opetussuunnitelmamuutos vaativat kuitenkin suuren määrän työtä lukiokoulutuksen puolelta ja myös suullisen kielitaidon opetuksen tulee kieriä aktiivisemmaksi nopeassa ajassa, jotta tavoitteet saavutetaan. Niin opettajat kuin oppilaat kuin myös lukiokoulutussektori ovat täten isojen paineiden alla.

Aiheen ympärillä on jo vuosien ajan pyörinyt kiivas keskustelu. Fokus on kuitenkin ollut enemmän englannin lukiokoulutuksen yleisessä pohdinnassa ja opettajien näkökulmaa muutokseen on tarkasteltu suurissa määrin. Myös oppilaiden suhtautumista on otettu huomioon, mutta useimmiten vain pintapuolisesti. Täten ollen tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on tuoda esille tarkemmin opiskelijoiden näkemyksiä suullisesta kielitaidosta ja suullisen kielitaidon ylioppilaskokeesta: saada heidän äänensä kuuluviin tämän ison muutoksen keskellä. Lukion kolmannen vuoden opiskelijat ovat oiva kohderyhmä, sillä heillä on eniten englannin opintoja takanaan ja ylioppilaskokeet ovella.

Uuden opetussuunnitelman toimivuuden ja suullisen kielitaidon lisäämisen tavoitteen kannalta on tärkeätä selvittää, miten tämä kohderyhmä näkee asian käytännössä. Heidän mielipiteitään ja näkemyksiään voitaisiin tulevaisuudessa hyödyntää esimerkiksi suullisen kokeen työstämisessä ja suullisen kielitaidon opetuksen monipuolistamisessa.

Tutkimusaineiston käyttötarkoitus, käsittely ja säilyttäminen

Tutkimuksesta saatua aineistoa käytetään ainoastaan tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarpeisiin. Aineistoa käsitellään ja raportoidaan luottamuksellisesti. Tutkimuksen anonymiteetti varmistaa, ettei tutkittavan tai koulun tietoja tule julki. Tutkimuksesta kerättyä digitaalista aineistoa säilytetään vain tutkielman tekoprosessin ajan. Valmis kandidaatintutkielma jää Jyväskylän yliopiston humanistisen tiedekunnan käyttöön ja se tallennetaan yliopiston kirjaston sähköiseen verkkokantaan.

Tutkittavan oikeudet

Osallistuminen tutkimukseen on vapaaehtoista. Tutkimuksen järjestelyt ja tulosten raportointi ovat luottamuksellisia. Tulokset julkaistaan tutkimusraporteissa siten, ettei yksittäistä tutkittavaa voi tunnistaa. Tutkittavilla on oikeus saada lisätietoa tutkimuksesta tutkijalta/tutkijoilta missä vaiheessa tahansa.

Tutkittavan suostumus tutkimukseen osallistumisesta

Olen perehtynyt tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitukseen ja sisältöön, kerättävän tutkimusaineiston käyttöön ja käsittelyyn sekä tutkittavien oikeuksiin. Suostun osallistumaan tutkimukseen annettujen ohjeiden mukaisesti. Tutkimustuloksiani ja kerättyä aineistoa saa käyttää ja hyödyntää sellaisessa muodossa, jossa yksittäistä tutkittavaa ei voi tunnistaa.

—
Päiväys

Tutkittavan allekirjoitus

—
Päiväys

Tutkijan allekirjoitus