Teaching to communicate
- A case study at a secondary school

Att lära ut kommunikation
- En fältstudie vid en högstadieskola

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how oral communication is perceived and used by five teachers at a secondary school in Malmö. Through qualitative interviews with the teachers, this paper aims to find a deeper understanding of their view on teaching. By looking at oral communication theories, sociocultural theories, a theory on discursive space and a recent study regarding English as a subject in Swedish secondary schools, it examines how the interviewees approach teaching. Based on the results, this paper will discuss how the teachers in this study initiate meaningful oral communication and how they view their own role as promoters of an oral communicative and inclusive learning environment.

The results show that the teachers’ thoughts concerning oral communication to a large extent seem to agree with the theoretical basis presented in this study. However, the teachers claim to be restricted by external factors. The results show that the teachers in this study find working with oral communication very time consuming. According to them, their lessons are too short and the classes are too big. Therefore they find it difficult to create an ideal learning environment. The teachers try to motivate and encourage their students through creating tasks that are interesting from the students’ point of view. In order to give every student the opportunity to speak, dividing them into groups during speaking activities is preferred. Furthermore, the teachers point out that the students’ personalities also are important factors to take into account, since some students are more reserved then others. Finally, the teachers aim to be supportive during oral activities, although the lack of time seems to be a restraint. They find it hard to manage their big classes and to be supportive to the individual student at the same time.

Key words: Classroom interaction, English as a target language, language acquisition, oral communication, teaching strategies
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1. Introduction

During the last decades, the aims and goals of the Swedish syllabus for English have changed. The focus has moved from structure and form to multifaceted communicative ability. In the current syllabus, it is clear that the National Agency of Education wants to prepare the students for an increasingly globalized world. A recent study, Engelska – En Samtalsguide om Kunskap, Arbetsätt och Bedömning, shows that Swedish students perform well in relation to other European countries. However, there is still room for improvement, especially when it comes to oral communication (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2008). According to the study, there is still a lot of focus on grammar and structure. Also, individual work appears to dominate the classrooms. The implementation of the new syllabus seems to be difficult to apply in practice.

As the English language is a part of the students’ everyday life, the improvement of their oral communicative ability is an extremely important topic to discuss. In an increasingly globalized world, insufficient English language skills might limit the students both on the labor market and in their social lives. There are a vast number of approaches that can be used to help the students to reach the goals in the Swedish syllabus for English. The center of gravity according to Samtalsguiden is that both the teacher and the students must predominantly use English during English lessons. The teacher must promote risk taking and has to let the students use and test the language on their own terms. There is also the challenge of motivating the students, which will not come automatically with a presented task or topic. As a teacher, these expectations are not easy to live up to. Neither is it an easy task to constantly challenge the students, since the individual pupils in the classroom are at different stages in their development. Learning to communicate in a foreign language is a long term process that involves lots of work. This study explores the perspective of five teachers at a
secondary school in Malmö. It sheds light on how these teachers work with oral communication in order for their students to reach the oral communicative goals of the Swedish syllabus for English.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to gain insight into how five teachers at a secondary school in Malmö perceive the role of oral communication in their classrooms.

1.2 Research questions

In order to gain insight into how the teachers in this study perceive the role of oral communication in their classrooms, the following questions will guide the discussion:

- How do the interviewees initiate meaningful oral communicative tasks in the classroom?

- How do the interviewees view their own role as promoters of an oral communicative and inclusive learning environment?
2. Background

In order to clarify what the teachers in this study have to aim for and work towards while teaching, this section will give a description of the oral communicative goals in the syllabus for English, both on the national level and on the local level. As Samtalsguiden was mentioned in the introduction, this section will also contain a more thorough explanation of the study.

2.1 Syllabus for English

The intention of the syllabus for English in the Swedish school system is clearly to enable the students to use English in communicative situations:

The ability to use English is necessary for studies, travel in other countries and for social and professional international contacts of different kinds. The subject aims at developing an all-round communicative ability and the language skills necessary for international contacts, and an increasingly internationalised labour market, in order to take advantage of the rapid developments taking place, as a result of information and communications technologies, as well as for further studies. (Skolverket, 2000)

The challenge for the teachers is to find strategies and to create an environment for this type of language acquisition to occur. As mentioned in the introduction, the syllabus for English has moved from structure and form to a more multifaceted communicative ability. Through
interpreting the syllabus, one can also make out the importance of creating a safe educational environment where the students are encouraged to try out the language and where they are not being corrected on every language mistake they make:

When their own language ability is not sufficient, pupils need to compensate for this by using strategies, such as reformulating, or using synonyms, questions and body language. (Skolverket, 2000)

By the end of ninth grade, the students should have achieved the following goals:

be able to actively take part in discussions on familiar subjects and with the help of different strategies communicate effectively (Skolverket, 2000)

be able to orally relate and describe something which they have seen, heard, experienced or read, as well as express and give their reasons on how they understand a topic that is of personal importance. (Skolverket, 2000)

The local syllabus at the school where the interviews are conducted has basically got the same oral goals as the national syllabus for grade seven, eight and nine. However, in grade nine it includes one additional goal:

Eleven talar med visst flyt så att en engelskspråkig person förstår innehållet (lokal kursplan för engelska i årskurs nio)

The element of fluency is highlighted here although it is not specifically mentioned in the national goals for the ninth grade. Furthermore, the school has got two specific goals to aim for that are related to oral communication:

Har en tilltro till sin förmåga att använda engelska i alla de sammanhang där det finns ett behov av att kommunicera på språket
Utvecklar sin förmåga till språkriktighet i skriftlig och muntlig kommunikation genom inlärning av basgrammatik och skrivregler (lokala strävansmål för engelska)

2.2 National surveys


Studenternas svar på frågebogen om hur de till exempel behandlar målspråket under lektioner varierar från lärarnas svar. Orava kommunikativa övningar är oftare lärarnas perspektiv än studenternas (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2008, s. 33). I tillägg, frågebogen visar att studenter betraktar läraren att främja mer av det talspråk under lektioner än vad lärarna tror. Dessutom, lärarnas svar i *Den Nationella Utvärderingen av Grundskolan*
(2003) show how the frequency of the English language use in the classroom has decreased compared to earlier surveys.

As mentioned above, many students claim that they can use English in situations outside school. However, *Den Nationella Utvärderingen av Grundskolan* (2003) shows that it is common for students to feel inhibited during lessons. In addition, many students experience that they do not get the opportunity to show what they are able to perform during class. According to researchers in the field of language, the high achieving students take risks while the low achievers are the ones who feel the need to translate words when they lack the vocabulary (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2008, p. 28). Therefore, the authors of *Samtalsguiden* feel the need to stress the importance of making the students aware of risk taking since it is critical part of language development. The students have to be willing to take risks by guessing and in order to promote this, and the authors suggest that the use of the target language in the classroom should be nearly 100 %. In addition, the authors believe that the risk taking and the development of the language is easier to accomplish if the content of the lesson is perceived as interesting and meaningful.
3. Theory

This section will cover a selection of theories and studies related to oral communication. It will give an explanation of what oral communication is and give suggestions of what to focus on while teaching. It will also bring up language learning theory to create an understanding of how new knowledge is internalized. Furthermore, it will explain how to make classroom discussions rewarding, both from a theoretical point of view and from a practical perspective.

3.1 Oral Communication

In order to work with oral communicative ability, we must define what it is. Canale & Swain (1980) developed the concept of communicative competence and divided it up into three components. The first is the grammatical competence which concerns everything from vocabulary and pronunciation to syntax and morphology. Canale and Swain have divided the second component, Sociolinguistic competence, into two parts: sociocultural competence and discourse competence. Sociocultural competence includes how to use the language in different contexts and discourse competence is the ability to combine parts of the language into entireties. Strategic competence is the third component and treats the ability to restructure language, ask questions and use body language. It is the user’s ability to express something when s/he lacks the words (Lundahl, 2009, p. 117-118).

Martin Bygate (2002) presents four levels of decision making that a speaker undergoes while communicating in order to understand the process of oral communication. When talking, the
speaker has to create a discourse model, which includes the intentions of what is being communicated. The speaker plans his or her utterance in connection to the specific context and audience. However, the speaker does not create a fixed pattern. The discourse is rather negotiated during the interaction. The second level is message conceptualization. When producing an utterance, Bygate explains that the speaker must conceptualize the “pragmatic purpose, content, speaker orientation, and appropriate speech acts in terms of contextual appropriacy and relevance” (2002, p. 30). Formulation is the third level, which refers to the speaker’s choice of language use in terms of topics, relevant vocabulary and grammatical lexemes as well as a phonological plan. The last level is articulation where the speaker has to consider pronunciation. The planning of articulation is carried out during the formulation phase and is according to Bygate relatively automated (2002, p. 32). Furthermore, Bygate describes four ways in which speech conditions affect the way grammar and vocabulary is used. Firstly, the lack of time for planning what is to be said while communicating makes the speech less lexically dense. Secondly, while interacting, both the speaker and the listener share the same space which makes it possible for the speaker to “refer directly to the environment” (Bygate, 2002, p. 34). They also share the same moment which makes it possible for the listener to understand the temporal context without the speaker pointing it out explicitly. Thirdly, during interaction, the speaker can refer to the listener with second-person pronouns and expect response. Finally, since both the listener and the context of the interaction are known to the speaker, informal language use is allowed. These four conditions can as well be applied to writing, although according to Bygate, “..the range of speech functions is wider than that in writing, and the informal end of the range is more common in speech” (2002, p. 34).

Johanson & Johanson has come up with five characteristics in communicative language teaching that helps the learner to become a competent language user: appropriateness (the language is adapted to the situation); message focus (the focus lies on what will be expressed and should be understood); psycholinguistic processing (all the comprehension processes are included: the cognitive, the affective and the social); risk taking (the students are encouraged to take risks with the language as the language errors are a natural part of language development) and free practice (the language is used as freely as possible) (Lundahl, 2009, p. 121). Furthermore, Lundahl implies that the ability to use verbal communication is best obtained through a holistic understanding of the language rather than through a fragmented
manner. Communicative language learning occurs as a social process where new insights and knowledge develop the understanding of oneself as well as widens the perspective of the target language. In communication with others, the students extend their own thoughts and understanding. Therefore, Lundahl suggest that the dialogue in the classroom should be exploratory which means that there should not be a predetermined answer for a given task (2009, p. 125).

3.2 Vygotsky

As the first research question in this paper aims to discuss how the teachers initiate meaningful oral communication, it is important to present an idea of how language learning occurs in order to discuss what the word meaningful implies in the context of this study. A sociocultural view of language learning will be explained below. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), Vygotsky’s theories represent a sociocultural perspective on language development and explain that from this perspective “language development […] arises as a result of social interactions” (47). In this study, Vygotskian theories are used to understand how knowledge is internalized.

Vygotsky’s concepts and theories are presented in the book Vygotskij i Praktiken (Strandberg, 2006). Vygotsky does not believe that knowledge is created in the individual's psychological world of ideas. Instead, it is created in interaction with the outside world and other people. Activity is the key to learning and can be explained by four main characteristics. The first characteristic is the social relationship. Through interaction, we find knowledge which we then make into our own, consequently: “..internal thinking has been preceded by external thinking with others” (Strandberg, 2006, p. 11, my translation). Secondly, Vygotsky mentions mediating artifacts. With the help of tools and symbols we make sense of things that are unknown. We make use of the tools to understand the world and through this we create an inner process. The third characteristic mentioned is situations and contexts. Vygotsky believes that activities always “..take place in specific situations as cultural contexts, rooms and places” (Strandberg, 2006, p. 11-12, my translation). To best understand a phenomenon, it is
important that learning occurs in an authentic setting. Creativity is the fourth characteristic and Vygotsky claims that humans have the ability to arrange situations in order to understand them. We try out different ways to assimilate new knowledge.

According to Vygotsky, internal and external processes cannot be separated since their interplay is fundamental for learning to occur. One cannot exist without the other. Furthermore, Vygotsky believes that the learning process occurs in two stages. The first is through external activity and the second through internal activity. Firstly, we understand the intended knowledge together with means and/or with others. Secondly, we transform the activity into an inner process. In addition, Vygotsky believes that we cannot incorporate knowledge with full potential before we have used the knowledge. We must use the new knowledge in order to make sense of it, to hear what we “...thought we knew” (Strandberg, 2006, p. 118, my translation). This way, we process knowledge to understand it through elaboration.

One of Vygotsky's most well-known theories is the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky believes that the learner develops when being challenged at a level of knowledge greater than the his/her own. In order to develop, the learner has to face a problem that is solvable through guidance of someone or through working with people more competent than the learner. To understand the problem, the person must therefore borrow concepts not yet attained. The desired knowledge must therefore be at a level that is challenging for the person but at the same time, in reach of the individual’s existing knowledge.

3.3 Discursive space

In order to discuss the second research question regarding how the teachers view their own role as promoters of an oral communicative and inclusive learning environment, ideas of how to create a productive learning environment will be explained below.

Ulrika Tornberg’s dissertation *Om Språkundervisning i Mellanrummet* (2000) uses the term discursive space. The discursive space is a “space that is shared by everyone and owned by no
one” (p. 112, my translation). It is in the discursive space that meaning is created and it exists as long as the interaction between individuals takes place. Furthermore, the individuals must be encouraged to be themselves in order to make the interaction authentic. Since the goal of the education is to prepare the students for future encounters with English speaking people, practice through hypothetical situations are often used as a method. Instead of making use of the students’ experiences, the exercises take place in a more or less unrealistic and monotonous situation. This is according to Tornberg a problem since the progression in the students’ ability to use the language is developed through habitual learning instead of through spontaneous interaction (2000, p. 265). Tornberg argues that learning becomes more effective if the students speak from their own experience rather than sticking to the teacher’s and the textbook’s contents (2000, p. 267). In addition, she claims that the assumption that the students’ language ability has to develop before it can be used is one of the biggest educational obstacles.

Angela Åberg (2006) developed a study based on Tornberg’s dissertation. Åberg’s purpose with the paper is to test the discursive space in practice, since she feels that Tornberg’s dissertation lacks the link to practical pedagogy. Through listening to a group discussion in German, Åberg draws the conclusion that if teachers want to create the discursive space, they have to loosen the control of the discussion. The students must be permitted to lead the discussion forward and speak freely in order to make the language their own. Åberg implies that discussions thrive when they are unorganized rather than collapse and suggests that the discussion becomes interesting when “everyone knows that no one knows where the discussion will end up” (2006, p. 31, my translation). Åberg also stresses the need make sure that the students have a solid foundation if they are to appear as themselves in conversation. “The goal is to build up their confidence rather than break it down” (2006, p. 32, my translation).
4. Method

This study is carried out at a secondary school in Malmö. It is what Hood (2009) defines as an instrumental case study. An instrumental case study is a qualitative method that sets out to shed light on a specific issue and provides information for further studies. A qualitative approach was chosen since a deeper understanding of how the teachers make use of oral communication during lessons is needed in order to discuss the research questions in this study. According to Hood (2009), quantitative methods often lack the sufficiency to answer these types of questions. Therefore, it is common for qualitative researchers to work with case studies since “it provides a framework for analysis” of authentic and exclusive material (Hood, 2009, p. 67).

It is possible to use a vast number of strategies in order to achieve the communicative goals and different teachers will have different opinions and understanding of each strategy. I will not be able to draw any general conclusions based on this paper, but it will shed light on how the teachers in this study perceive the role of oral communication in the classroom and will together with existing theories provide information for a discussion and further studies.

4.1 Interviews

The aim of the teacher interviews is to get the teachers’ perspective of how oral communication is used during the English lessons. The interviews are semi structured and an interview guide (see appendix 1) was used, however a lot of the answers in the results came
from follow up questions not included in the guide. In a semi structured interview, the researcher knows what topics to discuss and has got some questions that need to be brought up. At the same time, the researcher has to be flexible in the sense that the participant should speak freely and develop the answers in order to lead the interview forward. At the end of the interview, the participant should have discussed the topic and answered the questions set out by the interviewer and furthermore have been given the opportunity to developed his or her answers (Richards, 2009). Observation as a method to compliment the interviews was considered, but since time was rather restricted I chose not to. Additionally, observations carried out over a short period of time would not have contributed to the purpose since the oral communicative goals are worked towards over a long period of time.

4.2 Selection

This study could have been carried out at any secondary school in Sweden. The school where the interviews took place was chosen due to the connection I have there through my teaching practice. The students at this school attend from sixth to ninth grade and the grades are divided up into four classes each. The interviewed teachers at this secondary school have got ten to fourteen English lessons a week. From the seventh grade, the students are divided up into groups of stronger and weaker learners and the teachers collaborate within the grades although material used outside the textbook may vary. If all classes in a grade can work with the same tasks and with the same chapters of the book depends on the group and its level of English, although tests for each grade are designed through cooperation between the teachers. All interviewees are female and two of them have worked as teachers at the school for more than twenty years. One of the interviewed teachers has worked at the school for three years and the other two approximately fifteen years.
4.3 Procedure

I sent an e-mail to all the available English teachers at the school with information about the study and a request to interview them. I got permission to interview all five teachers. I had met the teachers before the interviews and I regarded it as convenient to have an established relationship with the interviewees since it contributed to a relaxed atmosphere when the conversations took place. The teachers chose a suitable occasion to carry out the interview and I recorded the conversation with my cell phone. One of the teachers was unable to participate in the interview due to an unexpected work task. I sent her an email with the questions I wanted answers to. After I got the answers back, I had the opportunity to e-mail her again for clarifications and further questions of interest. I transcribed all the interviews on the computer before choosing what would be relevant to presented in this study.

4.4 Ethical considerations

All of the participants are informed of what the study is about and it is based on voluntary participation. All of the teachers are also anonymous in the study. I assured the interviewees that the recorded material was not to be shared with anyone. I saw it as important that all the teachers felt secure throughout the study so that they had the confidence to answer the questions and discuss them as openly as possible. As the teachers were informed that they would be anonymous, I have created false names for the teachers. The teachers will in this study be known as Eva, Lisa, Mona, Charlotte and May.
Having transcribed the recorded material, this part will present the results of the interviews with the teachers. Through categorizing the data from the interviews, this section is divided into three sub-headings connected to the goals of this study.

5.1 Initiating meaningful oral communication

While teaching, all the interviewees strive towards speaking English as much as possible, although Eva and Mona claim that it is difficult within the lower grades. Also, all the teachers use Swedish when teaching grammar. They all use the textbooks to some extent and describe that the oral exercises mostly encourage the students to write and perform dialogues. Eva and Mona find the dialogues practical and usually let the students learn them by heart or rewrite them. According to Mona, the dialogues might be less authentic, but she feels as if it is a rewarding way for the students to develop their spoken English. The other teachers find the textbook exercises less effective and foremost try to bring in their own material into the classroom. As Charlotte describes it:

.. I don’t think they’re good at all, poorly constructed, boring and uninspiring. (my translation)
The best way to create a spontaneous and authentic learning situation according to most teachers in this study is through discussions. Eva finds it ideal if the students can speak freely as much as possible, but most of her classes need structure so she often provides the students with questions connected to the topic. She values scaffolding highly and always tries to dedicate a lesson or two to prepare the students before letting them discuss a given topic independently in groups. Charlotte also emphasizes the need for structure and says that she rarely lets them speak freely during oral exercises. According to her, it is often more productive to give the students structure and guidelines and she believes that the students appreciate it. She tries to work with speaking activities as much as possible. She mentions oral presentations, oral book reviews, group discussions and conversations. Since the lessons are short, working with dialogues is practical and she most often presents them with an everyday situation as taking the bus or going shopping. Sometimes she brings in an article and prepares questions for the students to discuss in groups. Mona tries to let the students work independently in groups, but she argues that it all depends on the students’ ability to use the language and how goal oriented they are. She wants to let them speak as freely as possible but, like Eva, she often feels the need to interact and guide the students while discussing different topics.

Lisa finds the oral part to be the hardest one to work with, mostly due to the number of students in every class. She claims that her students generally are good at expressing themselves in English and that most students would be able to get around in an English speaking environment without a problem. She uses the textbook but does not think that they give the student a lot of opportunities to speak. Most tasks in the textbook are trivial and she uses the texts for reading and listening exercises to see if the students can retell what they have read or heard. The oral tasks she uses are mostly complementary tasks that she finds outside the textbook and she occasionally brings up to date articles to class for the students to read and discuss in groups. The goal is to make the interaction as spontaneous as possible. She experiences that the classes with high achievers can handle discussions well, but she usually gives the students questions to discuss. Low achievers often try to answers the given questions as fast as they can instead of discussing them. Furthermore, she argues that if the students feel as they are being assessed while talking, it spoils the exercise. If an oral activity is to be productive, the students have to enjoy speaking.
Just like Lisa, May claims that it is hard to find time for oral exercises since she only has got each class two lessons a week and since the classes are as big as they are:

The hardest part is that the groups are too big and that the oral activities become unorganized. It is hard to make time for every student individually. (my translation)

She claims that the oral part of the lessons falls behind and that she cannot find time to listen to every student. She uses the textbook but points out that complementary material is needed for the oral communication. Examples of oral activities she mentions are retelling paragraphs in Swedish and in English, describing objects in pairs and discussing topics of interest. Choosing topics that appeal to the students is very important and according to May not hard at all. Furthermore, she claims that the discussion becomes profitable even though it is not authentic or realistic. The most important part is that the students get the opportunity to express themselves.

5.2 Inclusion

According to Charlotte, the most difficult part of working with speaking activities is to include everyone. Some students do not function well in group activities due to different reasons and therefore they often get to complement with another type of task. She argues that how active a student is during an oral presentation or a discussion depends on the student’s personality which ultimately makes it nearly impossible to fully include everyone on an equal level. To get as many as possible included in discussions she tries to lead the discussion through asking questions to the quiet ones, although she believes that the discussion becomes more profitable if the students can handle it on their own. During group activities she also tries to arrange so that the students who are more able to speak are spread out in different groups. Choosing topics after the students’ interests also helps. If the subject is interesting and exciting, even the weak learners want to participate most of the time. Since the willingness to participate in speaking activities is very individual and personal, Charlotte disregards that
Some students are less active than what is expected of them and argues that a teacher with experience should be able to recognize the students’ speaking ability nevertheless.

Eva seems to agree with Charlotte and claims that to let every student have his/her say is the most difficult aspect of working with oral communication. She argues that:

Some students are shy by nature and will not talk as much as others whether they are speaking English or not. (my translation)

In addition, she claims that since some students are shy, the only solution would be to start working with speaking exercises and their confidence during earlier years of schooling. Furthermore, she rarely lets the students form their own groups. She wants to organize the groups so that the groups contain students with mixed levels of English. The idea behind it is to have at least one student in each group who can stimulate the others.

Lisa admits that oral communication occurs less frequently than it should during her lessons. Given the time limit and the fact that the classes consist of so many students, she argues that writing exercises are more appropriate and more effective. Instead of four or five students talking during a discussion, which often is the case according to her, writing individually enables every student to work with their language more effectively. They learn vocabulary and exercise their grammar as well as fluency through writing and she claims that:

..if they can express themselves on paper, they can express themselves orally. (my translation)

She does not like the idea of forcing shy students to speak in front of the class and argues that she cannot change their personality. During group activities, she lets her students form groups since she understand that they feel more comfortable speaking with their closest friends.

The key element of working with oral activities, according to Mona, is to proceed from the students’ interest. She therefore tries to keep up to date with her students through interaction and often ask them to talk about themselves. Although she knows that all students are not keen on speaking in front of the class she tries to encourage them through questions and
positive feedback. As long as she has a good relationship with the students it seldom becomes a big problem.

5.3 Promoters of an oral communicative environment

None of the teachers correct their students’ language during oral exercises or presentations, although Eva mentions that she may ask for clarification if a student formulates a sentence that is completely unrecognizable. As Lisa works a lot with writing tasks she feels the students get enough feedback in written form. Charlotte tries to keep notes of all the students and always brings up common mistakes after the task or at the end of the lesson. May argues that the main idea is for the students to be able to make themselves understood and that the grammatical mistakes can be overlooked. According to her, fluency is the most important component.

According to Eva, the role of the teacher during oral exercises is to give room for the students to speak independently. She only engages if a group gets stuck and needs encouragement or questions to keep the flow going. The reason for this is that she does not want to interrupt a productive conversation amongst the students and she argues that they get more out of the interaction if they can solve problems themselves, or as she puts it:

..the students learn at best when overcoming obstacles together. (my translation)

During discussions, May tries to make time to listen to all of her students but finds it hard to manage conversing with them all. She claims that most of the time, she has to remind the students to stick to the subject and to speak English. This seems to be an issue with the other interviewees as well. Eva claims that she has two options if she wants to create a discussion. Either she discusses the given topic with the whole class or she divides the students into groups. If she makes use of the first suggestion, in most cases only four or five students will be dedicated to the discussion. If she divides the students into groups, she will not have time to listen to every individual and to interact with the students who need the support and
motivation. All the teachers make the effort to encourage the quiet students but as stated by
Charlotte:

..the fact that a student speaks does not necessarily mean that she feels included. (my translation)

Charlotte further explains that she as a teacher cannot just ask a student to discuss a topic and
assume that the student speaks out of interest. The student might speak only because the
teacher expects him or her to do so.

Both Charlotte and Mona mention that they sometimes try to let the students speak freely
since they believe that the feeling of being assessed all the time can block the learning
process. Lisa also has a different way of approaching the students during speaking activities.
She stresses the importance of the teacher’s participation during oral exercises. In order to be
inspiring she feels the need to show her interest in the subject through listening to and
speaking with her students. She does not want to interrupt a productive discussion, but
showing an interest and sharing her feelings is a necessary element of her way of teaching:

I cannot understand how a teacher can just sit down during a lesson. Stand up, walk
around, place a hand on a student’s shoulder, look at them! Be there with them so they
can feel that something is happening. Feelings are tremendously important. (my translation)
6. Discussion

Although the teachers at the secondary school to a large extent plan the subject areas of the lessons together, their view on how to work with oral communication differs to some extent. They all have in common that they strive towards using English as much as possible in the classroom. This is supported in the text *Samtalsguiden* (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2008) as it promotes risk taking which according to Johanson & Johanson (Lundahl, 2009) is a key factor when learning language. However, as mentioned in *Samtalsguiden*, teachers’ claim to use the target language and oral activities during lessons far more often than what the students experience. Yet, we cannot be sure whether it is the teachers’ or the students’ perception that reflects reality.

6.1 Initiating meaningful oral communication

All teachers seem to agree with the notion that discussing freely is the most beneficial method for language development, but as stated by Tornberg (2000), the assumption that the students must develop the language before they can use it seems to be well established. Letting the students learn through trying out the language in spontaneous interaction is difficult according to the teachers due to the time limit, the large number of students per group, the students’ personalities and the lack of motivation from some of the students. Mona and Eva use the textbook exercises and let the students create dialogues with the explanation that it seems to develop the students’ language and that it suits the time frame of the lessons. Charlotte also
mentions that she uses dialogues of everyday situations. This approach, according to Tornberg (2000), tends to emulate unrealistic and monotonous situations and might not be a sufficient way to prepare the students for encounters in an English speaking environment. On the contrary, it might not be essential to make the lesson activities authentic as stated by May. She argues that the most important aspect is to make it fun and interesting for the students so that they find it meaningful to speak. Although the authors of Samtalsguiden (2008) believe that the development of the language is easier to accomplish if the content of the lesson is perceived as interesting, it is just one aspect of language learning. Furthermore, as mentioned by Charlotte, the teacher cannot be sure whether the student speaks out of interest or simply because the teacher expects him or her to do so.

While the teachers in this study try to make use of material that is interesting for the students, such as up to date articles, the discussion in itself is often controlled through prepared questions. Åberg (2006) states that in order to create a discursive space, the teacher has to loosen the control of the discussion and let the students speak freely. Also, the risk of preparing questions is that the students try to finish the questions as fast as possible as mentioned by Lisa.

As mentioned by all teachers, content that is looked upon as interesting by the students will be easier to talk about. However, according to Lisa, it might not be the definitive solution. Low achievers might still have problems to create a more profound discussion. If the low achievers do not have the knowledge to create a deeper discussion, Vygotsky might suggest that they could be in need of guidance from a more competent learner since the knowledge that is needed to accomplish a discussion is just out of reach of the students’ competence (Strandberg, 2006). This could be done either through creating groups where there is at least one high achiever in each group as Eva suggested, or through teacher interaction. The later solution could state a problem since some of the teachers find it hard enough to get around and listen to all of their students.
Managing the big classes during a limited time period is for many of the teachers the biggest obstacle. In order for every student to get an opportunity to speak, the teachers preferred to create groups. At the same time, to get around and listen to everyone and to give the students support and feedback seems nearly impossible. The limitation of including everyone does not only seem to depend on external factors. The difficulty also consists to a large extent of the students’ internal factors. As highlighted by Eva and Charlotte, some students are shy. Lisa added that she does not think it is fair to force someone to speak either during presentations or discussions. She claims that it is a part of their personality and that it cannot be changed overnight. As a solution, Eva suggests that students have to start working with speaking exercises and their confidence earlier in schooling. As mentioned by Åberg (2006), students need to have sufficient tools in order to maintain their confidence and forcing them to speak while they feel insecure can be dangerous. Charlotte goes as far as saying that teachers have to accept the fact that some students do not want to speak and that the teachers have to disregard that some student are less active than others during speaking activities. However, if the teachers accept that their students do not want to speak during oral activities, they go against the syllabus for English which clearly states that the students have to be able to “actively take part in discussions” (Skolverket, 2000). Furthermore, Eva highlights the necessity of scaffolding. It provides the students with message focus described by Johanson & Johanson (Lundahl, 2009). It also decreases the risk of lowering the students’ self esteem by putting them into a situation where they do not feel prepared as mentioned by Åberg (2006).

Lisa uses an approach that differs from the other teachers’ methods and suggestions. Although she does use speaking activities in her teaching, she prefers that her students work individually with writing tasks. Furthermore, she claims that if they are able to write it, they can say it. This is a claim that could be argued. Vygotsky’s theories point out that knowledge is acquired through interaction with others (Strandberg, 2006). The students must try out the language in cooperation with others in order to make it their own and they need to speak in order to make sense of what they have learnt. However, writing promotes the students to try out the language on paper and could be worked with in an exploratory manner as mention by Lundahl (2009). One downside of this approach would be the dilemma of incorporating the
strategic competence in writing, brought up by Canale & Swain (Lundahl, 2009). Another argument in support of this approach is that she finds it more productive when everyone in the class is active during lessons. During speaking activities, a few students in class often take up most of the time, leaving the majority of the class only to listen.

### 6.3 Promoters of an oral communicative environment

All the interviewees see their role as teachers during communicative activities as being a support for the students. Every teacher except for Lisa claims to only interfere during discussions if they notice that the students seem to have a hard time communicating. As the teachers must grade and assess their students, they feel the need to observe every individual which again is hard to manage during a lesson. Lisa always tries to interact with her students unless she thinks it would interrupt a productive discussion. She also emphasizes the importance of sharing feelings and showing her own interest in the students’ discussions which would contribute to the psycholinguistic competence, brought up by Canale & Swain (Lundahl, 2009). As mentioned by Mona and Charlotte, sometimes letting the students speak freely without the teacher’s presence could be rewarding for the students. Eva points out that the students learn at best when overcoming obstacles together which goes hand in hand with Vygotsky’s view on language learning (Strandberg, 2006), Johanson’s & Johanson’s free practice (Luhndal, 2009) as well as Åberg’s assumption that the teacher must loosen the control over the discussion in order for the students to create a discursive space (2006).
7. Conclusion

This paper set out to find how the teachers at a secondary school in Malmö perceive and work with oral communication. The teachers cooperate within the grades while planning subject areas, but they approach working with oral communication differently. Through comparing the language teaching approaches in this study with the answers from the interviews, one can see that the interviewees’ methods used to teach oral communication not always correlate due to external factors and limitations. However, the teachers’ thoughts around language learning generally correlate with the language learning theories mentioned in this paper. The teachers agree that the students’ speaking ability develops best when the language is used freely in discussion. The topics to discuss should be connected to the students’ experiences and to their interests although, in practice, lack of time and the large number of students per class seems to be a limitation. Working with communicative exercises is time consuming and considering every student’s interest and giving them individual treatment is difficult. Also, to include everyone and to make sure that every student gets a chance to have their say during discussion is hard since the low achievers and the less motivated students often need the teacher’s assistance in order to maintain a successful conversation. The teachers must as well consider the students’ personalities since a high achiever or a motivated student also can be shy or reluctant to speak for personal reasons. With the best intentions, the teachers at this school seem to manage working with oral communication through adapting to the given situation. Although the condition for working orally is not the best possible, they find their own approaches to develop the students’ speaking ability. If additional and further studies would come to the same conclusion as this one, it would be advisable for schools to prioritize reducing the number of students per class, in order to create a more ideal learning environment.
8. References


Appendix 1:

Interview guide

Målen

- Vad är viktigt för eleverna att uppnå enligt dig, alltså vad är syftet med din undervisning?
- Hur vet du att eleven har uppnått målen? Hur bedömer man interaktion?
- Hur vet man att eleven kan ingå i spontan interaktion med en engelskspråkig person genom klassrumsinteraktion?

Arbetssätt

- Hur stor del av undervisningen sker på målspråket? Vilka delar sker inte på målspråket och varför? Hur skiljer sig årskurserna?
- Vilka typer av muntlig kommunikation får eleverna arbeta med? Situationsbaserat eller fritt?
- Behöver eleverna struktur eller räcker det med att du presenterar ett ämne? Vad fungerar/fungerar inte enligt dina erfarenheter? Får eleverna själva välja ämne och prata fritt?
- Använder du textböckerna i undervisningen? Hur använder du textböckerna? Hur funkar den när det kommer till muntlig kommunikation?
- Vad är viktigt att tänka på om man vill få alla delaktiga?
- Hur ser man till att alla får prata? (svaga elever och blyga elever) Vad tänker du på när du delar in i grupper?
- Vad är viktigt att tänka på när man planerar muntliga uppgifter? Finns det ämnen eller typer av uppgifter som fungerar bättre än andra? Ser du något samband mellan dessa?

Lärarens roll

- Interagerar du med eleverna när ni arbetar med muntliga uppgifter/diskussioner?
• Till hur stor del anser du en lärare bör styra diskussioner? Behöver läraren styra diskussioner?