Four Teachers’ Thoughts about Pupils’ Speaking Anxiety in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract

Findings by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2011), show that some pupils in Sweden feel anxiety when speaking English. This is no surprise to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) who state that speaking is regarded to be the scariest part of language learning. To understand the phenomenon of speech anxiety further and to contribute to existing research, the purpose of this study was to investigate what learner speech anxiety is according to four chosen teachers as well as their strategies in dealing with speech anxiety. The teachers play an essential role when dealing with learner anxiety. Not including the pupils themselves is not necessarily a limitation, but a strength: Young (1992) reports that the students’ perspectives have been well-documented, and that investigating the teachers’ point of view might offer new insights on the issue at hand.

In retrieving information from the four teacher respondents, semi-structured interviewing was used, adopting pragmatic qualitative research as an approach as well as the two paradigms phenomenology and pragmatism.

The teachers perceive speech anxiety in the subject of English to be the learners’ feeling of nervousness, worry and fear stemming from real or imagined insufficient language skills, a fear of making mistakes and being humiliated. To decrease anxiety, the teachers believed ample oral practice in small groups in a supportive environment to be part of the solution. There was, furthermore, strong mutual agreement regarding what not to do: forcing and pressuring pupils to speak when feeling uncomfortable with speaking in front of others.
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1. Introduction

In a fairly recent study by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2011), investigating 22 compulsory schools (year 6-9) in Sweden, it was reported that the majority of the lessons observed were held in a safe and supportive environment. At the same time, however, pupils expressed they felt anxiety when speaking English. The reason: fear of embarrassment in combination with making mistakes: pupils feared being laughed at by their peers if they said something inaccurate. Because of this anxiety-provoking belief, whether real or imagined, some pupils avoided speaking English in class. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate also found that many pupils feel more confident using English outside of school compared to speaking the target language in class (the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2011). Even though those findings just concern the 22 schools investigated, it is entirely possible to find pupils experiencing speech anxiety in other school classrooms as well. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) would agree since they argue that “[a]s long as foreign [and second] language learning takes place in a formal school setting where evaluation is inextricably tied to performance, anxiety is likely to continue to flourish” (p. 131). The three authors point out that pupils experience speaking as “the most threatening aspect” (p. 132) when learning a foreign/second language and further stress that “the current emphasis on the development of communicative competence poses particularly great difficulties for the anxious student” (Horwitz et al, 1986, ibid). Indeed, there is a great emphasis on communicative competence in the subject of English in Sweden: pupils in years 7-9 are expected to, for example, make use of “[l]anguage strategies to contribute to and actively participate in conversations by taking the initiative in interaction, giving confirmation, putting follow-up questions, taking the initiative to raise new issues and also concluding conversations” (the Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011a, p. 35). Because of the learners’ beliefs about language learning, the classroom context in which they learn as well as the importance given to communicative competence, speech anxiety remains an urgent problem.

The teaching must therefore not be limited to enhancing the pupils’ communication competence in English through taking active part in conversations, but also should help pupils develop their confidence as speakers of English. In fact, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011b) states that believing in oneself is fundamental in order to take part in the English language classroom as well as other situations and contexts where English is used. Axelsson (2011) suggests that speech anxiety may become a major obstacle in any learning context; we learn together and from each other, expressing and sharing our views and ideas.
Speech anxiety may therefore hinder learning – not only on an individual level, but on a group level, too. The Swedish National Agency for Education (2011b) further highlights the importance of feeling confident as a speaker of English as it provides the pupils with ample opportunities to express themselves in another language, enables them to leave their comfort zone, meet new people and develop an understanding of cultures other than their own (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011b). Feeling anxiety when speaking English can thus become a problem as it prevents pupils from communicating and expressing themselves orally as well as achieving academic goals. In this way, speech anxiety may result in exclusion and close doors of possible new learning experiences.

A majority of the research on academic anxieties, such as speech anxiety, suggest possible pedagogical implications to help teachers understand the nature as well as the causes of anxiety in order to create an atmosphere where pupils feel more confident. As the literature on speech anxiety in language classrooms seems, primarily, to be intended for teachers, this stresses their importance in dealing with the problem of anxiety, giving them a very powerful role. The notion of the teacher’s vital role is furthermore supported by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2011) which states: “the teacher and the teaching cannot change factors such as socioeconomical background, but can reduce their importance and influence factors such as the learning environment, motivation, interest and confidence” (p. 10, my translation and italics). Horwitz et al. (1986) also agree with the view that teachers can diminish pupils’ feelings of anxiety and support their confidence; teachers need to acknowledge the existence of speech anxiety and listen to the student’s needs before suggesting concrete solutions. The teacher can help the anxious pupil in two ways according to Horwitz et al. (1986); the first option involves helping the pupil manage his/her anxiety; the second option involves minimizing and changing anxiety-provoking factors in the learning environment. Expressed in another way; “teachers can help students reduce their anxiety levels by focusing both on the individual characteristics associated with anxiety and on the instructional factors that contribute to increased anxiety” (Horwitz, Tallon & Luo, 2010, p. 108). The key here seems to be a supportive and understanding teacher in order to reduce anxiety and help learners become more confident foreign/second language speakers. Given this essential role in the pupils’ learning, it becomes necessary to ask the teachers about their beliefs regarding the issue at hand.

In addition to affecting achievement and learning as stated earlier, anxiety may also become “an emotionally and physically uncomfortable experience for too many language learners” (Horwitz et al. 2010, p. 109). “[A]nxious students are desperately trying to avoid
humiliation, embarrassment, and criticism, and to preserve their self-esteem. Teachers, therefore, must acknowledge this anxiety” (Tsui, 1996, p. 159-160). This further calls for the necessity for teachers to not only be aware of the issue of speech anxiety amongst the learners, but to actively deal with the problem and support the pupils in order to make them become more confident speakers of English.

But why investigate learner anxiety without including the pupils themselves? In 1992, Young stated that “[t]he student perspective on language anxiety has been well documented” (p. 157). Additional research on pupils experiencing speaking anxiety have followed since (Hilleson 1996 and Trang, Baldauf & Moni 2013 to name a few examples). Arguing for the necessity of investigating the teacher’s views on language anxiety, Young (1992) interviewed four teachers/specialists in the field, claiming that discovering teachers’ thoughts on language anxiety “can help develop a more complete understanding of this complex psychological phenomenon” (Young, 1992, p. 157). Another reason not to include the pupils’ own perspectives is that anxious students may feel that speech anxiety is a private matter and thus find it difficult to talk about. Talking about this private matter may result in uneasiness, which is contra-productive: the aim is to reduce anxiety. I also hope to contribute to prior research since I have had experience with speech anxiety myself: my interpretations might be different from those who never, or rarely, have experienced this type of worry.

1.1 Purpose and Research Questions

To sum up the introduction above, confidence when speaking is seen as an essential part of language learning and development (the Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011b). But pupils in Sweden are reported to feel anxiety when speaking English in class. This is no surprise to Horwitz et al. (1986) who have found that language learners experience oral communication as the most anxiety inducing aspect when learning a foreign/second language, also stressing that an emphasis on communicative competence causes pupils to feel anxious. However, in the subject of English in Lgr11\(^1\), great importance is put on the development of communicative competence: the ability to understand others and to make oneself understood. The weight put on communicative competence induces speech anxiety rather than oral communication confidence. When resolving learner speech anxiety, teachers are viewed as playing an essential role (Horwitz et al 1986; Horwitz et al 2010; Tsui 1996). It is therefore important to further study speech anxiety from the teacher perspective since the teachers are

\(^1\) Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre 2011
an integral part of the solution. Young (1992) argues that investigating the teachers’ thoughts on learner speech anxiety contributes to our understanding, offering possible new ways of looking at the issue “because much of what we currently know comes from the students’ perspective” and “other perspectives merit consideration as additional sources of understanding” (Young, 1992, p. 170).

The aim of this study is therefore to contribute to the existent area of research on speech anxiety through interviewing four teachers about their views on the subject matter, specifically their strategies when helping pupils to overcome their speech anxiety. My research questions are the following:

- What is speech anxiety according the four teachers?
- What strategies do they find useful when helping pupils overcome their speech anxiety?

1.2 Previous Research

1.2.1 Anxiety, Social Phobia and Speech Anxiety

In this study, I examine speech anxiety in the foreign/second language classroom. However, before we narrow the research down completely, let us first define anxiety in its broad sense and compare speech anxiety to social phobia.

Encyclopædia Britannica (2014) defines anxiety as “a feeling of dread, fear, or apprehension”. Horwitz (2001) seems to agree with this notion since she states, with support from Spielberger (1983), that “[a]nxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry” (Spielberger, 1983, p. 1 in Horwitz, 2001, p.113). Individuals experiencing speech (or speaking) anxiety, thus, feel uneasy and uncomfortable when they need to communicate orally. Axelsson (2011) explains that speech anxiety can occur when one does a presentation: you might feel nervous days before the presentation, during the presentation itself as well as after the presentation has taken place. For some, the anxiety is gone when the presentation is done. Speech anxiety is not limited to presentations, but can also be experienced in other situations where we need to express ourselves orally: on the telephone, in job interviews, meetings, and in school settings such as seminars and discussions (Axelsson, 2011).

Since speech anxiety seems to arise in social situations, one might wonder if speech anxiety is the same as social phobia. According to Axelsson (2011), this is not the case: individuals experiencing speech anxiety do not necessarily suffer from social phobia. In turn,
suffering from social phobia does not automatically mean that one has speech anxiety. It is common, however. Social phobia is, moreover, broader in scope compared to speech anxiety: speech anxiety is limited to the situations where one is expected to communicate orally. Social phobia, on the other hand, is extended to other social situations, going shopping to give an example (Axelsson, 2011). Other examples of social phobia include fear “to sign a check in front of a cashier at the grocery store, or … eat or drink in front of other people, or use a public restroom” (National Institute of Mental Health, n. d).

1.2.2 Communication anxiety, language anxiety and speech anxiety
The intention with this section is to explain and compare the terms communication anxiety, language anxiety and speech anxiety.

Learners can feel anxious in all language contexts: first, second and foreign. When one feels worry and anxiety about communicating in front of others in any language context, it can be perceived as communication anxiety (Hilleson, 1996). Language anxiety and foreign language anxiety are somewhat different to communication anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) state that “[l]anguage anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p. 284). This means that speech anxiety can be viewed as a subcategory to language anxiety, or as Gkonou (2013) points out: “speaking anxiety is subsumed under the umbrella term of language classroom anxiety” (p. 54). The remaining three skills (listening, writing and reading) are also subcategories to language anxiety and should be seen as separate anxieties (Gkonou). Young (1992) seems to support this idea since she divides language anxiety into the four skill areas: speaking, listening, writing and reading and found that her four respondents viewed speaking to “[produce] the greatest amount of anxiety in language learners” (p. 168).

Even though Horwitz et al’s (1986) term ‘foreign language anxiety’ suggests a limitation to the following areas: learning a foreign language (and not a second) and language anxiety (that is, not skill-specific) – this is not necessarily the case. Actually, one can see that Horwitz et al. (1986) treats ‘foreign language anxiety’ as a skill-specific form of anxiety: speech anxiety receives the most attention throughout their paper. The focus on speaking has not seemed to have changed much since then as “most research has focused on the anxiety associated with second language speaking” (Horwitz et al. 2010, p. 106). Hilleson (1996) points out that foreign language anxiety is rather wide in scope since it “could embrace much of the anxiety experienced” (p.260) by the language learners: any task where one has to
perform in a language which is not one’s own may induce anxiety. However, as earlier mentioned, “foreign language anxiety has been almost entirely associated with the oral aspects of language use” (Horwitz, 2001, p.120). Moreover, no clear distinction is made between second and foreign language learning contexts in Horwitz et al’s paper from 1986: the terms seem to be used as synonyms. And indeed, “most SLA researchers currently view foreign language anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety related to second language learning” (Horwitz, 2001 in Horwitz et al. 2010, p. 97).

To sum up, communication anxiety is the feeling of anxiety in any language context (L1, L2, FL), whereas language anxiety has to do with the anxiety connected to the four skills (speaking, listening, writing, reading) in the same language contexts. Speech anxiety is a subcategory to the wider umbrella term, language anxiety. However, the term ‘foreign language anxiety’ should be understood as speaking anxiety in L2 and FL contexts.

1.2.3 Speech Anxiety in the Second/Foreign Language Classroom

Researchers proposed the idea that “anxiety interferes with second language learning and performance” (Horwitz, 2001, p. 113) back in the 1960s. Empirical evidence of this relationship occurred “much later” (ibid). In their report from 1986, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope were the first to define foreign language anxiety and proposed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) as a means of measuring this anxiety. But the definition of anxiety amongst pupils in the second/foreign language classroom is, nevertheless, somewhat unclear. The issue of the ever-changing definitions is addressed by Young (1990), who sees inconsistencies in anxiety research and a neglect of various important factors, making it problematic to understand how anxiety, language learning and language performance are related to each other (Young, 1990). Maybe this is due to anxiety’s complex and multifaceted nature and occurrence in a wide range of individuals and situations. Or as expressed by Scovel (1978): “anxiety [is] not a ’simple unitary construct, but a cluster of affective states influenced by factors which are intrinsic and extrinsic to the foreign language learner’” (Scovel, 1978, p. 34, cited in Hilleson, 1996, p. 249). Anxiety is a subjective, complex, changeable feeling and depends upon the individual and his/her social environment.

There has also been some debate regarding foreign language anxiety and the FLCAS. Sparks and Ganschow’s (2007) believe that “the [FLCAS] measures students’ self-knowledge of their language learning skills rather than their anxiety about language learning”, according to Horwitz et al. (2010, p. 100). As reported by Horwitz (2001) and Horwitz et al. (2010),
Sparks and Ganschow further claim that language anxiety and difficulties in a foreign or second language is caused by L1 language disabilities: poor native language learning abilities results in anxiety (Horwitz 2001, Horwitz et al. 2010). Horwitz et al. (2010) admit that it is entirely possible to experience foreign/second language anxiety because of language disabilities in one’s L1. But with support from MacIntyre (1995a, 1995b), Horwitz et al. (2010) argue that Sparks and Ganschow’s idea is too simplified as it only considers cognitive abilities; the social context in language learning is overlooked (MacIntyre in Horwitz et al. 2010). In addition, Horwitz (2001) states that Sparks and Ganschow fail to explain why there are language learners who feel anxious without having problems in their L1. Advanced and successful language learners may feel anxiety as well: anxiety is not limited to a specific type of language learner (Horwitz, 2001).

In their article, Horwitz et al. (1986) relate foreign language (classroom) anxiety with three other performance anxieties: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. The first performance anxiety, communication apprehension, is described as “a type of shyness characterized by fear of or anxiety about communicating with people” (p. 127). Pupils experiencing communication apprehension feel a difficulty speaking in public, but can also feel anxious speaking in groups or one-to-one conversations. The second performance anxiety, test anxiety, comes from a fear of failure and unrealistic demands. Nothing less than perfect is permitted, and so, mistakes should be avoided. An oral test may both trigger test anxiety and communication apprehension. The same test may also trigger a worry about teacher and peer evaluations about oneself. This brings us to the third performance anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, which is by no means restricted to test-taking since it can be experienced in “any social, evaluative situation” (p. 128). Learners who suffer from fear of negative evaluation, worry about others perceiving them in a negative manner based on what the anxious pupil say. Speaking thus becomes particularly anxiety-provoking with regard to those three performance anxieties. When it comes to speaking a foreign or second language compared to one’s native tongue, speaking also becomes increasingly problematic as it requires more risk-taking, according to Horwitz et al. (1986): “any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual’s self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic” (p. 128).

It is important to point out that foreign language anxiety is not a mere combination of the three performance anxieties. Instead, foreign language anxiety (and hence speech anxiety) is defined as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process”
(Horwitz et al, 1986, p.128). In other words, foreign language anxiety shares similarities with other anxieties, but is unique and a form of anxiety in its own right (Horwitz et al, 2010).

2. Research Lens

This research, as stated earlier, examines four teachers’ perspectives on and strategies dealing with learner speech anxiety in the ESL-classroom. To investigate this phenomenon, I used the research lens as seen in figure 1 below to guide my research. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) view a research lens as “something that both facilitates and influences perception, evaluation and understanding” and further define it as “a mental model that helps researchers to clarify the focus of the investigation” (p. 46). To put it in short: the five components of the research lens help the researcher to interpret the data. A brief explanation and clarification of the approach (3) and the three paradigms (1) chosen follow in the next two subsections. Please see section 1.1 for information about the purpose and investigated phenomenon (2) and section 3 for information about data collection (4) and analysis (5).

Figure 1. Research Lens.

2.1 Approach: Pragmatic Qualitative Research

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) discuss and describe a research approach they have chosen to call ‘pragmatic qualitative research’ due to its connection to pragmatism and “aim toward practicality” (p. 178). The authors state that this approach “draws upon the most sensible and practical methods available in order to answer a given research question” (p. 171). Even though this approach is broadly used, it has received little acceptance as some scholars view it
to be easier, more crude and less theoretical compared to other approaches. Some view the approach to be subjective, open and highly interpretative, while others categorize it as objective: a basic, general description. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) see the bad reputation as unfortunate and undeserved, arguing that this approach, otherwise known as ‘basic or generic qualitative research approach’, has theoretical origins (that is: pragmatism) which their name-proposition ‘pragmatic qualitative research’ also indicates. Savin-Baden and Major further question the idea that it is an “easy approach or one to be taken lightly” and quote Sandelowski who reports: “‘there is nothing trivial or easy about getting the facts, and the meanings participants give to those facts, right and then conveying them in a coherent and useful manner’” (p. 171). Pragmatic qualitative research is, moreover, not a question of ‘either-or’ since it entails a mixture of both objective description and subjective interpretation. Or as Savin-Baden and Major put it: pragmatic qualitative research constitutes “the meeting point of description and interpretation, in which description involves presentation of facts, feeling and experiences in the everyday language of participants, as interpreted by the researcher” (p. 172). Not only is objective description and subjective interpretation blended together; there is also a freedom to combine different philosophical paradigms. All in all, Savin-Baden and Major describe this research approach to be flexible, eclectic and unique. Because its flexibility and possibility to mix and match different orientations, it becomes increasingly necessary to clarify the different perspectives used. This is what I do in the next section.

2.2 Paradigms: Phenomenology & Pragmatism

As indicated in figure 1 previously, I adopted phenomenology and pragmatism to guide my analysis of the teacher transcripts.

In their comparison of different paradigms, Savin-Baden and Major (2013) see phenomenology as intersubjective: a position between objectivity and subjectivity, combining the two worlds – just like the approach ‘pragmatic qualitative research’. In phenomenology, “[r]eality is an individual’s interpretation of experience”, “[k]nowledge is derived from the interpretation of individual experiences” and the research purpose is “[t]o develop phenomenological insight” (p. 64). Indeed, the purpose of this research is to understand the phenomenon learner speech anxiety from the eyes of four teachers. Each of the respondents provided me with interpretations of their experiences: their personal realities. Those interpretations were then analyzed and interpreted to result in knowledge. This means that
there is no such thing as one single universal truth; instead, there are many truths to be told. If someone disagrees with any of my respondents’ views, or my interpretation of them, it does not necessarily mean that one or the other idea is wrong – it just means they are different from one another.

Similar to the approach ‘pragmatic qualitative research’ which is situated between objectivity and subjectivity (description and interpretation), pragmatism lies between realism and idealism (objective reality and subjective, mental reality). Pragmatists assume that reality is an experience and “the truth of an idea is dependent on its workability; ideas or principles are true in so far as they work” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 60). Robson (2011) explains the term ‘workability’ further, stating that theories “become true and […] are true to different degrees based on how well they currently work” (p. 28). Truth is thus changeable rather than static. My four respondents might change their views of learner speech anxiety over time as their experiences might change. Teacher D, who has been a teacher for 40 years, showed proof of this when asked whether learner speech anxiety in the ESL-classroom is a common problem or not. Teacher D replied that speaking anxiety is not as common today as it has been in the past due to the growth of English in society. Pupils are more surrounded by the English language than they used to be and, therefore, feel more comfortable speaking it. Here we can see that what the truth is or not, and to what degree, depends on who views what, when, where and under what circumstances.

3. Method: Data Collection and Analysis

As my research purpose is to investigate a few teachers’ thoughts about speaking anxiety amongst ESL learners and what those specific teachers say they do to help pupils to overcome their English speaking anxiety, I decided to interview four teachers in order to develop a deeper understanding of the issue and contribute to existing research. This paper’s primary data is therefore based on the four teacher interview-transcripts. Before explaining the research procedure, let us first turn to the core of this research: the participants.

3.1 Participants

I interviewed four teachers from three different schools: two compulsory schools and one at upper-secondary level. The two compulsory schools are situated in different municipalities in the south of Sweden: the one where Teacher A and D work is located in a small town, whereas Teacher B work at a school which is located in a relatively large city. The upper-
secondary school, where Teacher C works, is situated in a small town in the middle of Sweden. All schools are local authority schools and hence not independent schools.

Before starting the interview, the respondents had been informed about the purpose of the study and their right to anonymity as well as their right to withdraw during the interview. Participation was voluntary and the informants were informed about this. All the interviewees signed an informed consent form (see appendix 7.2) before participating. For an overview of the teachers’ teaching experience, please see table 1 below.

Table 1. The four teachers’ teaching experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Number of years as a teacher</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Level/years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>Recently finished teacher education and has worked for 2 months.</td>
<td>Swedish/English, Swedish, French.</td>
<td>Compulsory school. Year 6-9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>English, Swedish.</td>
<td>Upper secondary school. Year 1-3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher D</td>
<td>40 years</td>
<td>English, German. Teacher D has also taught French, Spanish, Swedish, Swedish/English and Civics.</td>
<td>Compulsory school. Year 6-9. Teacher D has earlier taught on upper secondary school level and Komvux.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see in table 1 above, all four teachers teach English. Based on the purpose of this study, this was a requirement. Hatch (2002) would describe my sample as a criterion sample because of this “predetermined criteria” (p. 99). Since all four respondents were relatively “easy to access”, we could view them as convenience samples, too (Hatch, ibid).

However convenient, my informants also enrich my research due to the following reasons: Teacher D has worked as a teacher during four decades and taught five different languages, but also Civics. Teacher D has moreover taught English to students in year 6-9 as well as upper secondary level and Komvux. Teacher D’s experiences are invaluable due to her

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3 I have chosen to call the teachers “Teacher A (B, C, D)” in analogy with the number of years they have been teaching (Teacher A has been teaching the least number of years; Teacher D has been teaching the most).
4 Number of years working as a teacher at the time of the interview (dates during October 2014).
number of years as a teacher, and her experience with a wide range of languages. Hatch (2002) would further describe Teacher A as a snowball or chain sample since Teacher D recommended the colleague Teacher A to take part in the study. Teacher A and Teacher D can be seen to complement each other as they are standing on opposite ends of the experience continuum: Teacher A recently started her teaching career, while Teacher D has been teaching for 40 years. Both Teacher A and D’s beliefs and strategies in coping with learner speech anxiety are in this way valuable because they might shed a fairly different light on speech anxiety. Moving on, we find Teacher B and C somewhere in-between A and D on the experience continuum. At the moment of the interview, Teacher B had been teaching for two years. Almost a majority of the students, at the school where Teacher B works, are reported to pass all their subjects in year 9. A few years ago, approximately 50% of the students passed. The reason for this improvement is said to be due to an investment in language development in all subjects: Teacher B’s school works actively with strategies that are meant to make the pupils communicate easier and develop their language abilities. I found this highly interesting and contacted Teacher B who accepted taking part in this study. Moving on to the forth and last respondent: a mutual contact recommended me to interview Teacher C who works actively with speech anxiety and is very interested in the issue at hand. As the other three respondents currently teach English in compulsory school (years 6-9), Teacher C contributes to my research because of her 15-year-experience in teaching English to exclusively older adolescents (upper secondary school, year 1-3). Not only have the four teachers worked with students of different ages and levels of English, their teaching portfolios (number of teaching years, subject experience) also differs from one another and are all unique. All four respondents complement each other and hopefully make my findings reliable and valid. It is important to note, however, that the data collected from those four interviewees should not be viewed as representative of a larger population. Whether their experiences, and my interpretations of these, are applicable to other contexts or not is up to each individual reader to decide.

3.2 Procedure

All four interviews took place in October 2014. The four respondents were interviewed one-to-one in Swedish (the respondents’ L1) because of two main reasons. Firstly, I wanted to get as much input and information from each individual as possible and to prevent the respondents from influencing one another, reaching group agreement. Secondly, the respondents also had greater opportunities in selecting the time and place in comparison to
interviews conducted in a group. Bryman (2008) supports these notions as he points to the limitations of interviews conducted in a group: the difficulty of arranging a time and place that suit everyone. As shown in research by Asch (cited in Bryman, 2008), group interviewing also entails the risk of suppressing individual views which are different from what the group agrees upon.

The interviews were furthermore recorded with a dictation machine to ensure that the respondents’ answers were reported as accurately as possible. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face, but the one with Teacher C was carried out via telephone due to geographical reasons. In contrasting these two ways of carrying out an interview, Bryman (2008) sees advantages and drawbacks with them both. One advantage with telephone interviewing is that it can be seen as less biased compared to face-to-face interviews, where the interviewer’s “mere presence” may affect the answers of the interviewee (p. 198). The same remoteness also has its disadvantages: it is difficult to respond to facial signs of puzzlement as these cannot be seen. However, Teacher C made use of verbal communication to let me know when something was unclear: asking me to re-state one question as well as asking me what I meant by another. Another disadvantage is that respondents interviewed via telephone are less willing to expand on their answers and “[tend] to be less engaged with the interview process” in comparison to face-to-face interviews (p. 199). From my experience of the interview with Teacher C, however, there were no signs of unwillingness or disengagement. The mixture of the two interview contexts is a strength rather than a weakness.

All four individual interviews were semi-structured interviews. This data collection method, according to Bryman (2008), offers a flexible way of obtaining information within relative boundaries. The boundaries can be seen as formed by the interview schedule’s questions and topics (see appendix 7.1 for interview guide in English and Swedish). All questions in the interview schedule were covered and asked in a similar way, according to Bryman’s advice. In semi-structured interviews, the focus lies on “how the interviewee frames and understands issue and events”, and thus, what he/she gives most importance (p. 438). This focus relies on the flexibility of the semi structured interview: questions are relatively open-ended to allow different replies, and there is opportunity to ask respondents follow-up questions that do not appear in the interview schedule (Bryman, 2008). As the purpose of this research is to investigate learner speech anxiety from the perspectives of the four interviewed teachers, I found semi-structured interviewing to be the golden mean to collect data: it offers flexibility, but within boundaries.
3.2.1 Data Analysis

While the data collection method suggests an emphasis on the four participants’ views and experiences, the research approach additionally recognizes the researcher as interpreter of the same data. This leads us to the explanation of how the analysis of the four teacher transcripts was carried out.

I strived towards transcribing what the four respondents said – word by word. However, I did not pay attention to how things were said as informal speaking is out of scope of this research. The transcriptions include pauses as well as false starts/unfinished thoughts. Words like “um” and “eh”, which indicate thinking, were on the other hand, omitted.

Lichtman (2006) and her explanation of “the three Cs [sic] of analysis: from Coding to Categorizing to Concepts” (p. 167) served as a guide when analyzing my interview data. Dividing the process of analysis, she suggests six steps. The first step is to generate different codes as one reads the transcripts. The second step involves modifying the earlier codes by, for example, renaming them to make comparisons easier (Lichtman, 2006). Almost every line of the four transcripts was coded paying specific attention to what was said about speech anxiety: what it is, its consequences, reasons and how to overcome the issue at hand. Even though this method may at first glance “seem like an arbitrary exercise because not every line contains a complete sentence and not every sentence may appear to be important” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 50), it can, at the same time, prevent the researcher from imposing his or her “preconceived notions on the data” (ibid, p. 51). To Charmaz (2006), line-by-line coding is an analytical tool which encourages the researcher to stay “open to the data and to see nuances in it” (ibid, p. 50). Line-by-line coding is furthermore more focused and produces more ideas compared to reading an interview as an entire narrative (Charmaz, 2006). Moving on to Lichtman’s (2006) third, fourth and fifth step in the process of analysis: placing the codes in categories, then modifying the categories and lastly: modifying these modified categories. The sixth and final step is to produce concepts (or themes) based on the categories.

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) define a theme as “a unifying or dominant idea in the data” (p. 427), “[marking] a movement from description, categorization and preliminary analysis toward interpretation” (ibid). Similarly, Lichtman (2006) states that the themes “reflect the meaning you attach to the data you collect” (p. 170). The overarching themes can be found in the headings in section 4.1-4.2.4: Speech Anxiety – What it is; English Speaking Anxiety as the Feeling of Nervousness, Worry, Fear; English Speaking Anxiety Affects Grades, but Not Necessarily; Speech Anxiety – Possible Reasons and Teacher Strategies; (The Feeling of) Insufficient Knowledge and Lack of Practice; Perfectionism, the Fear of
4. Results and Discussion

Trang, Baldauf and Moni (2013) point to the need for both teachers and pupils to be aware of “the elements of FLA [foreign language anxiety], including its possible sources, effects, and management strategies” in order to understand the issue of speech anxiety in its entirety (p. 239). If teachers and pupils are “aware of the nature of their [learner] anxiety, they may know how to work with it” (Trang et al, 2013, p. 217). The presentation of the results, therefore, concern the teachers’ thoughts on what speech anxiety is, effects, the possible sources/reasons and teacher strategies in helping pupils overcome it.

Again, note that the data collected should not be seen to represent a larger population. Whether the four teachers’ experiences, and my interpretations of these, are applicable to other contexts or not is up to each individual reader to decide.

4.1 Speech Anxiety – What it is

4.1.1 English Speaking Anxiety as the Feeling of Nervousness, Worry, Fear

All four teachers view English speaking anxiety as the feeling of nervousness, worry or fear, which is supported by Horwitz et al. (1986) who see anxiety as the “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry” (p.125), but also dread. These feelings may result in avoidance behavior: missing class or “seek[ing] refuge in the last row in an effort to avoid the humiliation or embarrassment of being called on to speak” (p. 130). In an interview by Young (1992), Krashen states that the front rows in a classroom are connected to more speaking and, in turn, more anxiety compared to the ones at the back. Teacher C, who has worked at upper secondary school for 15 years, recognized the same avoidance behaviors. Skipping class because of one’s speech anxiety was the worst case scenario in Teacher C’s opinion. Teacher C also said that some anxious pupils tend to hide in the classroom and choose to sit in strategic places, explaining that “they try to get away” (page 22, comment 27, my translation from Swedish into English) and pretend their teacher does not see them. Yet another sign of speech anxiety is silence, according to Teacher C. Similarly, Trang et al. (2013) report that pupils suffering from this type of anxiety may be silent or otherwise avoid speaking in class. Young (1992) reminds us, however, that silence is not necessarily a sign of anxiety. Indeed, silence can mean many things – concentration being one of them.
4.1.2 English Speaking Anxiety Affects Grades, but Not Necessarily

All four teachers seemed to agree that severe speaking anxiety affects the grades in the subject of English. Hardly expressing oneself orally, if at all, becomes a problem since speaking is part of the knowledge requirements. Teacher D believed that pupils suffering from speech anxiety are less fluent compared to their more confident peers. The lack of fluency prohibits them from reaching the higher grades. Horwitz et al. (1986) agree with the notion that speech anxiety “represent serious impediments to the development of second language fluency as well as to performance” (p. 127).

Even though speech anxiety has a negative impact on grades, there is, however, hope. The four interviewees expressed a belief that speech anxiety can be overcome and changed for the better. Speech anxiety do not need to be a problem in the end.

4.2 Speech Anxiety – Possible Reasons and Teacher Strategies

4.2.1 (The Feeling of) Insufficient Knowledge and Lack of Practice

The four interviewees address, to various degrees, the anxious pupils’ English knowledge level; some pupils experience speech anxiety due to insufficient knowledge and language skills, while their more proficient peers suffer from lack of confidence. Their views seem to be supported by Horwitz et al. (2010), who claim that anxiety can be found “in learners at all levels” (p. 100). And it is entirely possible for language learners to feel anxious “even if their objective abilities are good” (Horwitz, 2001, p. 119).

The teachers further perceived pupils to be more anxious in English (L2/FL) compared to their first language, in which they feel more confident and can communicate with greater ease. Maybe this is because of the limited knowledge and risk-taking in combination with unrealistic demands – reasons that are put forward by Horwitz and her colleagues (1986).

The natural management strategy, if limited language knowledge/skills is the problem, is then to work with language and “conquer as many words as one can” (Teacher C, p. 27, c. 148-149, my translation) as well as phrases and language structures. Teacher C encourages her upper secondary school pupils to work actively with English both inside and outside the classroom to get as much practice as possible. Indeed, to practice the target language is key in dealing with anxious language learners, according to the four teachers. Teacher A and B viewed preparation to serve as a form of practice. Teacher A mentioned that easy, familiar words may ease speaking since pupils, in this way, feel more prepared and confident in their abilities. Teaching for 5 years, Teacher B makes use of some language-developing strategies,
with which B’s pupils have become very familiar. One of these language-developing strategies is “IPA”, which can be defined as a way of working: Teacher B explained that “IPA” means that each pupil begins with thinking or writing (i)ndividually, and then moves on to discuss in (p)airs. Finally, (a)ll pairs take part in a mutual discussion. The teachers in Tsui’s (1996) study acknowledged that “get[ting] students to write down their answers before offering them to the whole class” is an effective strategy when helping pupils overcome their speech anxiety (p.162). Pupils were perceived to be more confident when given “time to think about the question and to formulate their answers” (ibid). In addition, pupils can try out several ideas and gain peer support in pair and group discussions (Tsui, 1996).

And so, both knowledge and confidence seem to increase through numerous practice opportunities. To Teacher D, it is essential to speak often and in small doses: to face one’s fears and speak. Teacher C similarly proposed that ample practice is central when reducing anxiety in learners. Because of the lack of oral L2/FL production practice and the artificial context5, Teacher C aims to create a learning environment where speaking English becomes natural and normal. Speaking English should not be a big deal.

4.2.2 Perfectionism, the Fear of Making Mistakes and Peer Evaluation

Closely connected to insufficient knowledge and low confidence is the fear of making mistakes as well as having unrealistic expectations about language learning. Teachers B and D remembered their own past fears, now overcome, and reported that wanting to be perfect, the feeling of being negatively evaluated, not being the expert (Teacher B) and the fear of embarrassment and failure (Teacher D) greatly contributed to their anxiety. All four interviewees seemed to agree that learners’ perfectionism, fear of making mistakes and negative peer evaluation are reasons for speech anxiety. The teachers find support in Horwitz et al. (1986), who state that L2/FL learning inevitably involves making mistakes and further relate speech anxiety to perfectionism and worry about being negatively evaluated by peers. Teachers B and C pointed to the fear of making mistakes in general, while Teacher A and the work colleague, Teacher D, focused on insecurity and fear regarding making pronunciation mistakes. Teacher D contrasted the fear of making pronunciation mistakes and the fear of making grammatical mistakes, saying that fear of the former is more common than fear of the latter: “there is no one who laughs at you if you use the wrong formulation and put a ‘s’ or an ‘ed’ [in the wrong place] because they are unable to do that themselves” (p. 34, c. 54-56, my

5 Teacher C describes speaking in one’s L2/FL as speaking in an artificial context, meaning that pupils are expected to communicate in L2/FL when it would, in fact, be easier to speak in mutual L1.
translation). Pronunciation is different: “’aha, this sounds funny’ and then people laugh” (ibid, c. 56, my translation). And those kinds of experiences are difficult to get over, Teacher D concludes. Also Teacher C pointed to some pupils’ bad experiences, making them hesitant when it comes to speaking in class. The bad experiences involve peers giggling or that peers “haven’t respected what they [now anxious learners] have said. Looks and so forth” (p. 24, c. 62, my translation). Clearly, some pupils fear being ridiculed by their peers if they say something wrong (the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2011; Trang et al, 2013). In turn, this may lead to pupils aiming for perfectionism: not making mistakes and thus avoiding humiliation.

In accordance with the reported reasons behind speech anxiety, the four teachers emphasize the following strategy: creating supportive environments where mistakes are seen as a natural and unavoidable part of language learning. Teacher A says that teachers should work as role models, showing that making mistakes is easy and that we can understand each other despite the made mistakes: pupils should know and feel that making mistakes is not the end of the world. Teacher C agrees: perfectionism and the fear of making mistakes when speaking is pure madness due to the nature of conversation – to get a conversation right is an unfeasible task. Teacher C uses old, non-confidential recorded material from the National Agency of Education in order to make the pupils realize that you can, indeed, understand a conversation even though it contains pronunciation or grammar mistakes. It is furthermore of outmost importance to create a positive and allowing environment, where pupils dare and can make mistakes without being ridiculed, Teacher C adds. Similar strategies are presented in research by Tsui (1996), where the interviewed teachers’ strategies included establishing good relationships in a supportive environment as well as an acceptance of a variety of answers and a focus on content rather than form to ease the learners’ fears of making mistakes. The question of supportive relationships does not only concern the bonds between the learners themselves, but additionally includes the relationship between pupil and teacher. One way to establish a good relationship, is to “involve students in discussion about their feelings concerning language learning” (Tsui, 1996, p. 164). The same idea is put forward by Teacher D. Tsui (1996) suggests yet another method to establish a good relationship between pupil and teacher: working to overcome speech anxiety as a team. Teacher B informs the pupils of future situations where they need to speak, telling them that “we” are going work together and make you succeed (p. 13, c. 58).
4.2.3 Safety through Small Groups – Dealing with Speech Anxiety Step by Step

Communication apprehension, having difficulty speaking in pairs, groups and public, “plays a large role” when it comes to speech anxiety in the L2/FL classroom (Horwitz et al, 1986, p. 127). Teacher A, B, C and D all acknowledge its importance when dealing with speech anxiety and helping their pupils overcome their fears. How? The all consider a step-by-step approach as a successful strategy. Pupils begin with speaking in pairs and then move on to small groups, which are expanded with time and practice. Pupils are able to choose how they wish to present: Teachers A, B and D mention individual presentations as an option, while Teacher C says that no one needs to present in front of the rest of the class – unless they want to.

The step-by-step approach might be successful because of its use of pair and group work and activities. Pair and group work, as mentioned earlier, serve as a form of practice, preparation and learners may find support in their peers (Tsui, 1996; Young, 1992). But we can work with groups and individuals in different ways. Teacher C pair up students sitting next to each other, perceiving them to be close and feel comfortable and safe with one another. Teacher D offers a slightly different perspective: communication can be eased through different groupings. However, one way of working does not necessarily exclude the other.

To make pupils feel comfortable and safe individually and in groups, the teachers proposed considering task content and the method of working. Teachers B and C let the pupils record themselves in pairs or groups. The pupils seem to feel safe working in this way, and everybody says something. The recordings enable the teachers to listen to the pupils again and again (Teacher B). The pupils also have the opportunity of listening to themselves and learn through this process (Teacher C). In terms of task content, Teacher D viewed learner anxiety to increase if speaking about oneself and one’s views. The worried pupil feels it is better to talk about something far from oneself to avoid possible attacks. One of the interviewed respondents in Young’s (1992) seems to agree with Teacher D:

It is a mistaken idea that talking about what the student is interested in and the student’s own experiences will lower his [or her] anxiety level. I suspect it’s the other way around: if you do rote drills, in which the student has no emotional investment at all, then there’s no anxiety in getting the answer right (Young, 1992, p. 166).
However, Teacher A reminds us that some pupils find it easy to talk about themselves. And some pupils prefer drills such as grammar-fil-in-exercises, while others dislike the same. Hence, teachers need to be responsive to the needs of the pupils and pay heed to variation.

4.2.4 Unsuccessful Strategies: Constraint and Indifference

There is no question about what strategy the four teachers view as the most unsuccessful: to force or pressure a pupil to speak when he/she feels uncomfortable with the situation. Pushing a pupil to produce an oral answer may “[embarrass] the student and [discourage] […] from volunteering in the future” (Tsui, 1996, p. 161). The four teachers seem to agree with Tsui’s notion: forcing or pressuring a pupil to speak is never a good idea as it can result in avoidance and even more fear.

Another strategy believed to be unsuccessful when dealing with speech anxiety, is not caring and giving up on the anxious pupils. Based on this, as well as the other findings in this research, the four respondents view teachers as having a key role when reducing anxiety levels amongst learners. The same idea is supported by Horwitz et al. (1986), Tsui (1996), Horwitz et al. (2010), the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2011) as well as Trang et al. (2013).

5. Conclusion

As earlier mentioned in the introduction, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011b) and Axelsson (2011) stress the importance of having confidence in oneself when using and learning a language. It is therefore unfortunate that pupils in Sweden reported feeling a lack of confidence when speaking English in class (the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2011). This is of no surprise to Horwitz et al. (1986) who state that pupils view speaking to be a particularly fearful experience when learning a foreign/second language. To fully understand speech anxiety, Young (1992) suggests investigating the teachers’ point of view, since there are ample studies on the student perspective. Horwitz et al. (1986), Horwitz et al. (2010) and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2011) also acknowledge the teachers’ essential role in dealing with learner anxiety, making pupils confident speakers of the target language.

Since teachers are given this central role, I chose to interview four teachers of English about speech anxiety and their management strategies. Next, I provide a summary of the results and answer the research questions: what is speech anxiety according the four teachers? In addition, what strategies do they find useful when helping pupils overcome their speech anxiety?
Speech anxiety in the subject of English is perceived to be the feeling of nervousness, worry and fear and can result in avoidance behavior. Not showing up for English class or not showing one’s speaking skills, being orally inactive obviously affect the grades in the subject of English. Teacher D furthermore believed that learners suffering from speech anxiety are less fluent when it comes to speaking, which prohibits them from reaching the higher grades. But, if the teacher and the anxious pupil deal with the anxiety and try to decrease it, it does not necessarily need to be a problem in the end.

Possible reasons for speech anxiety, according to the four respondents, include: learners having insufficient knowledge or not feeling confident enough about their abilities. Speech anxiety seems to stem from a fear of making mistakes in combination with the fear of peers’ negative evaluation: saying something wrong might result in laughter or some other form of disrespect. This finding is in line with earlier observations by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2011): speaking English trigger anxiety because the pupils fear of being ridiculed if they say something wrong. Having unrealistic expectations about language learning (perfectionism) and communication apprehension are additional reasons proposed by the four teachers.

In accordance with the reported reasons, the four teachers believed in increasing the learners’ knowledge and confidence through ample oral practice in small groups where learners can find peer support, to be successful ways of decreasing and resolving anxiety. Making pupils understand that mistakes are a natural and unavoidable part of language learning was also seen as a successful strategy. As one of the steps to dare speak more often, Teachers B and C let their pupils record themselves in pairs or small groups. Teacher D turned our attention to task content: anxious learners might not want to talk about themselves and their experiences because of personal investment and the fear of being attacked. Speaking about objective topics might, in this way, ease oral communication. Teacher A, however, reminded us that pupils have different needs even though they suffer from the same anxiety. That is, there is no such thing as one universal answer or single strategy applicable to all language contexts and learners, as anxiety is a complex construct, depending on various factors. All in all, it is important for teachers to be responsive to the needs of the pupils, and for teachers and pupils to work as a team, dealing with speech anxiety together.
6. References


7. Appendices

7.1 Interview Guide in English and Swedish

About you: number of years you have been teaching, subjects/grades you teach.

General thoughts about speech anxiety

2. Is speech anxiety in the ESL classroom different from other subjects that you teach? If so, how and why?

Speech anxiety and its consequences

3. How does speech anxiety affect the pupil academically (communicative competence, grades in English)?

Causes of speech anxiety

4. What can English speaking anxiety be caused by?

The teacher’s role and strategies in dealing with speech anxiety

5. What strategies do you use to help the pupil overcome his/her speech anxiety in English, if it is caused by x? That is: a. How do you modify your tasks, your teaching and assessment to the pupil with speech anxiety? What strategies do not work? b. How do you work with the class as a group to minimize speech anxiety within an individual? What strategies do not work? c. How do you work with the pupil who is experiencing speech anxiety? What

Om dig: antal år som du har undervisat, ämnen/ärskurser som du undervisar i.

Generella tankar om talängslan

2. Skiljer sig talängslan i engelska-klassrummet från andra klassrum som du undervisar i? Om ja, hur och varför?

Talängslan och dess konsekvenser

3. Hur påverkar talängslan eleven akademiskt (kommunikativ kompetens, betyg i engelska)?

Talängslans orsaker

4. Vad kan talängslan i engelska orsakas av?

Lärarens roll och strategier i hanterandet av talängslan

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<td>6. Where does speech anxiety stem from (the teacher, teaching, task, assessment, language, learner, group) and how does it affect the teacher’s possibilities to help the pupil?</td>
<td>6. Var kommer talängsan ifrån (läraren, undervisningen, uppgiften, bedömningen, språket, eleven, gruppen) och hur påverkar detta lärarens möjligheter att hjälpa eleven?</td>
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7.2 Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Hej!
Jag heter Sofia von Kogerer, är lärarstuderande och går den nionde terminen på Malmö högskola: engelska och lärande. Jag skriver just nu mitt examensarbete (15 hp) på avancerad nivå och undrar om jag skulle kunna få intervjuar dig som en del av min undersökning.

Syftet med min undersökning är att genom intervjuer med några lärare (4-6 personer) i engelska ta reda på deras tankar om den talängslan som hindrar vissa elever från att tala Engelska. Vad är talängslans konsekvenser, orsaker och lösningar? Hur hjälper du dina elever att övervinna sin talängslan?

Deltagandet är givetvis frivilligt och du kan även välja att avbryta din medverkan närsomhelst under intervjun. Om du väljer att delta, kommer du att vara anonym och därmed oidentifierbar för utomstående.


Jag har läst och förstått texten ovan och tackar härmed ja till medverkan i Sofia von Kogerers undersökning.

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Jag vore oerhört tacksam för din medverkan! Tack så mycket!
Om du har några frågor eller funderingar, så nås jag lättast via email: xxx@xxx.com
Med vänliga hälsningar/
Sofia von Kogerer

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