

Oral Communication in English Classes at Senior High School

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Abstract

The aim of this work was to study students' opinions about oral communication during English lessons at Senior High School. In the communicative society we live in today it is important that people have the ability to communicate orally in English. The curriculum clearly states that Senior High School should develop the oral communication and social competence of the students. It has been shown that this is not always the case. Research shows that the typical communication in a classroom is a one-way communication where the teacher talks and the students are given the opportunity to say a few words. This study has focused on investigating how students in three practical classes and three theoretical classes in their final year of Senior High School feel when they have to communicate orally in English at school. It has also discussed their opinions about oral communication in general and if they think it is an equal distribution between oral communication and written exercises during their English lessons.

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1 Introduction

English is the second language for many people in the world today. It has become the international language of business and commerce, science and technology, and international relations and diplomacy. To be able to communicate orally in English gives advantages in many different situations. English is among other things used in business and higher education, during vacation in foreign countries and among friends. In the communicative society we live in today it is taken for granted that people can speak and understand English (Rubin, 1994:12-13).

People today can easily travel abroad, communicate via satellite and explore almost every corner of the world via the Internet (Axtell, 1995:3). Almost everywhere you go in the world there are English signs, English speaking people, songs and English expressions (Bryson, 1990:173-179). Today it is important to master languages and above all oral communication. It is our democratic right and duty to dare to speak in front of other people (Ekström, 2001:35).

It becomes more common for students after Senior High School or College to work in other countries or work for Swedish companies with business contacts abroad. A society with a living democracy needs people who dare to express their opinions and stand up for their rights. This competence is needed in order to enable people to live a good life where they have the opportunity to express emotions, thoughts and needs (Ostrowski, 2001:3). Languages and communication make it possible for us to meet other people and socialize. It is an ongoing process of words, intonation and body language (Nilsson, 1990:7-12).

Body language is a non-verbal language which interacts with the verbal language. Consciously or unconsciously people send out signals during a conversation or speech (Allwood, 1986:72-76). During conversations or speeches it is important that the verbal language and the body language do not contradict each other. When this is the case people tend to rely more on the body language than on what is said. If a person stutters nervously when speaking and is in a cold sweat while explaining that he/she is very confident people do not believe it (Linell, 1992:19-21).

Communicative apprehension is something research discusses and it means that people avoid communicative situations (Ekström, 2001:9-17). Many people in Sweden suffer from anxiety of speech and in every class there are students who have difficulties when speaking in front of the class (Ostrowski, 2001:119). Insecurity and anxiety often result in some people avoiding communicative situations. Students, who among friends are talkative, might become mute in situations where they have to speak in front of the class. Many adults react in the same way when they have to give a speech in front of a group of people (Linell, 1992:43-45).

Oral communication during lessons at school is often a problem because of the size of the class. Shy students often remain quiet while talkative students take the opportunity to speak when they can (Allwood, 1986:132-146). The goal of the curriculum is to prepare students for further studies or work after graduation and also strengthen their confidence (Läroförbundet, 2002:41-45). Despite the fact that the curriculum says that Senior High School should increase the communicative and social competence of a student this is not always the case.

1.1 The aim of the study

The aim of this work is to study students' opinions about oral communication during English lessons at Senior High School. It seems as if a lot of students feel insecure when it comes to using the English language orally even though they have good grades in English and can express themselves in writing. One might wonder if the English education at school has anything to do with this.

1.2 Method and material

1.2.1 Target of investigation

The study was made among students in three theoretical classes and three practical classes in their last year at a Senior High School in the northern part of Sweden. The theoretical classes in this study consist of 25 students on the Natural Sciences program, 24 students on the Technology program and 28 students study social sciences. In the practical classes 9 students are part of the Electricity program, 11 students are on the Vehicle program and 15 students

study music. This makes a total of 112 students. The study does not make a difference between answers from boys and girls in the questionnaire. Since there is an unequal number of students in each class the results of the questionnaire is shown in percentage. The principal of the school selected classes in which a questionnaire was handed out by the teacher of each class. The reason why the study was made in a Senior High School is that the students will soon graduate and either begin to work or study at the university. It is important that they feel confident when they communicate orally in English since English is a language they will come across and use in their everyday life.

1.2.2 Questionnaire

The method chosen for this study was a questionnaire. The reason a questionnaire was used to collect information in this study, was to reach out to a large number of students in an easy way. Questionnaires are often used in schools and other situations when a large number of informants are required (Troost, 2001:10). The questionnaire of this study is anonymous and has been answered by the students during class. The questionnaire is in Swedish with multiple-choice questions and room for complementary comments (see Appendix).

An advantage of using questionnaires is that the person answering the questionnaire runs a small risk of being influenced by the person performing the study. For the person performing the study it is moreover an easy way to reach out to a large number of people in a short period of time. A disadvantage with questionnaires is that it can be difficult to make questions which cover the entire field of interest. Reactions which can be seen in interviews are absent in questionnaires. Questionnaires are furthermore based upon questions which makes the study as a whole dependent on the willingness of the target of investigation to answer questions (Patel, 1994:61). The answers in the questionnaires have been compiled in a quantitative way and the results are shown in diagrams. The analysis and discussion are based on the information in the questionnaire. Possible sources of error are explained and analyzed.

2 Background

As a general background to this study information on communication, the English language, body language, anxiety of speech, conversation/speech, the classroom situation and the national curriculum will precede the analysis.

2.1 Communication

The word *communication* comes from the Latin word *communicare* which means ‘that something becomes common’ (Nilsson, 1990:7). No matter what people are going to do when they meet, whether it is to dine, play or work, they communicate by means of signals, gestures, looks, intonation and words. It is an unavoidable process. Communication includes many things such as sharing information, feelings, thoughts and influences (Nilsson, 1990:7). It is an important social process and functions as a tool for contact, transfer of ideas, influences and development. Every opportunity to communicate offers a chance of personal development (Dahlkwist, 1994:5). One of the most fascinating characteristics of humans is their ability to communicate, create social relations and complex societies (Nilsson, 1990:9).

Today’s society is going through a communicative revolution with the Internet, cell phones, satellites and digital TV. The world has in a sense become smaller and more accessible (Ostrowski, 2001:98). Our society is a communicative society with different ways of spreading information. This gives us great opportunities and enriches our lives, at the same time as it forces us to communicate in new ways. The new ways of communicating make it more important than earlier to communicate not only in our native language but also in English because of its role as an international language (Dahlkwist, 1994:15). Communication is not only a matter of giving out information or receiving information. It is a two-way interaction in which practice is needed for both speaking and listening (Skolverket, 2001:86-88). In order to become good at communicating experience is needed since it is important to feel secure in communicative situations (Nilsson, 1990:34-36).

2.2 The English Language

Today the English language is one of the major languages of the world. English is the most widely spoken language in the world and has a large number of both native and second language speakers (Svartvik, 1999:1-5).

It is the main language of the world's books, newspapers, and advertising. It is the official international language of airports and air traffic control. It is the chief maritime language. It is the language of international business and academic conferences, of diplomacy, of sport. Over two thirds of the world's scientists write in English. Three quarters of the world's mail is written in English. Eighty per cent of all information stored in the electronic retrieval systems of the world is stored in English (Crystal, 1990:7).

Without exaggeration it can be claimed that people today live in a world of communication and many people are not content knowing only their native tongue but instead choose to learn a second or perhaps even a third language. There are many different reasons for learning a second language. It might have to do with a person's profession, the wish to identify closely with the culture and people of the target language and it is also often required to learn a second language at school. A lot of personal benefits can be gained from the study of second languages; individuals who study second languages and cultures improve their abilities to communicate internationally and interculturallly. They expose themselves to a global perspective, and enhance their career potential in the ever-growing area of international trade and cross cultural professional exchange (Rubin, 1994:12-13).

2.3 Body Language

Humans communicate not only verbally, but with their entire body. 75% of all communication takes place with non verbal expressions such as intonation, body language and facial expressions (Ostrowski, 2001:27). This phenomenon often occurs unconsciously and the body never lies. Body language confirms and gives more meaning to the words. It has a dominant influence on communication (Backlund, 1997:61). Body language and spoken language are dependent of each other. A message cannot be sent out without the interaction of both (Fast, 1981:101).

In every meeting between people where communication takes place, there is an interaction between verbal language and body language. How the voice is used and what signals our body sends out matter to the whole context (Fast, 1992:9-11). The first impression of a person

is very important. An upright and stable body position gives the impression of being in control, whereas the opposite gives an impression of insecurity (Fast, 1992:178-179). If a person feels confident the body language sends out signals of confidence. People tend to believe in people who look and act confidently rather than those who look and act insecurely (Linell, 1982:19-21). When communicating with another person all these signals and words interact. Body language often reflects the inner feelings of the person (Ostrowski, 2001:27). This is why it is important to feel secure when communicating with other people.

2.4 Anxiety of Speech

Anxiety of speech is a condition where a person feels discomfort when having to speak in front of people or communicate with other people. There is a present fear of forgetting what to say, make a fool of oneself or even faint. There are three main symptoms of anxiety of speech namely, physical symptoms, intellectual processes and emotional reactions. Physical symptoms of anxiety or fear might appear days before the speech with stomach ache or sleeping problems. During the speech they appear as increased heartbeat, cold sweat, fluttering voice, hyperventilation and a nervous stomach. Intellectual processes include repeating words, memory loss and general confusion. Finally, physical and intellectual symptoms are followed by emotional reactions. Emotional reactions include feelings of fear, loss of control, helplessness, nervousness, panic and a feeling of humiliation. These three symptoms all interact with each other (Rogers, 1989:17-18).

In Sweden a lot of people suffer from anxiety of speech and in every classroom there are students who have problems when it comes to speaking in front of the class. In many cases this anxiety gets even worse if the communication has to be in a foreign language. The discomfort which people who suffer from anxiety of speech feel often has to do with bad experiences from school which follow them up to adulthood (Rudberg, 1982:53-65). A certain feeling of nervousness is normal before a performance and makes the speaker more alert and focused, but it should also be mentioned that some people are shy by nature and do not enjoy speaking in public (Strömquist, 1998:94-95).

Anxiety of speech might influence a person's entire life by making the person trying to avoid situations which has to do with oral communication. To feel safe when communicating orally

in English is very important since it is used in everyday life after Senior High School. Feeling confident when speaking English is also important since our body language never lies (Ostrowski, 2001:119). Humans have the ability to read signals which another human sends out and in order to convey confidence when communicating in English the speaker needs to feel secure. In the classroom it is important for the teacher to create a safe atmosphere in the class. It is also important to practice oral communication on a regular basis in order to avoid that anxiety of speech haunts the students their entire lives (Strömquist, 1998:53).

2.5 Conversation/Speech

There is a significant difference between conversation and speech. In everyday life there are plenty of opportunities for conversation. Conversations teach us to speak, listen, comment and cooperate with other people. Most people do not feel uncomfortable when they talk spontaneously with other people. It feels like a natural situation which most people are used to and have had plenty of experience of.

Making a speech on the other hand is a completely different situation mainly because it is a one-way communication. The speaker is separated from the group and is the center of attention. In general, people are more used to being part of the audience than being the speaker (Rogers, 1989:19-22). The step from conversation to speech generally involves problems. A lot of people have difficulties when they have to speak in front of other people. A person's language and communicative development begin at home and continue at school. In order to make students good at communicating it is important to make oral communication a natural element in language studies. The school is responsible for supporting the communicative ability of the students (Strömquist, 1998:14-15).

2.6 The Classroom Situation

Pedagogical research has investigated what the average communication in a classroom at Senior High School looks like and the results have shown that it is mostly a one-way communication performed by the teacher. During a 40-minute lesson approximately 200 utterances have been made and the teacher is responsible for 150 of them. This means that 20-30 students have to fight for the remaining 50 (Ostrowski, 2001:119). How successfully

students can participate in the communication in classrooms depends on how easily they can adjust to the conditions at school and how much time they have to practice oral communication at school.

Further research in this field shows that the classroom situation looks the same no matter what the subject is. The teacher is responsible for 70% of the utterances during a lesson. 50% of that time the teacher asks questions and 20% of those questions are open for any of the students to answer (Allwood, 1986:135). The traditional school situation, where the teacher speaks and the students get the opportunity to utter a few words, has to change if the students are to be fully prepared for life after Senior High School which might include work or further studies in other countries.

Oral communication in school should be a natural part of the education in every subject. In that way students would become more confident in the position as speaker at the same time as they extend their knowledge (Strömquist, 1998:66). Oral communication during English lessons needs to be a natural part of the class. English should be used in the same way as Swedish is used in class. Apart from putting the focus on increasing the oral exercises, it is also important to emphasize that English should be spoken both by students and teachers during entire English classes. A teacher who only speaks English during lessons can create a safe environment in the classroom where students are motivated to speak English and do not feel insecure (Eriksson, 2001:53-56).

2.7 What does the National Curriculum say?

According to the national curriculum the school is supposed to develop a student's communicative and social competence (Läroförbundet, 2002:39). Senior High School should, among other things, improve the knowledge of the students and prepare them for a professional career and further studies at universities (Läroförbundet, 2002:41). According to the national curriculum students should aim at the following goals:

- develop their ability to communicate and interact in English in a variety of contexts concerning different issues and in different situations,
- deepen their understanding of English as spoken in different parts of the world, and improve their ability to understand the contents communicated by different media,
- develop their ability to take part in conversations, discussions and negotiations and express with subtlety their own views and consider those of others,

- develop their ability to speak in a well structured way, adapted to the subject and situation (Skolverket, 2005).

In order for students to be well prepared for further studies or work after graduation from Senior High School, it is important, as the curriculum says, “that the students can express their own views both orally and in writing in order to get along in society, in everyday life, in their future jobs and studies” (Läraryöbundet, 2002:41, my translation). The national curriculum further says that the school is responsible for strengthening the students’ self-confidence and preparing them for the future (Läraryöbundet, 2002:45). The issues discussed above arouse the question what the communication during English lessons at Senior High School looks like and if the students themselves feel that they get enough time to practice their oral skill.

3 Analysis

Students in three theoretical classes and three practical classes in their last year at a Senior High School in the northern part of Sweden participated in the study and answered a questionnaire. The students were asked questions about their opinion of oral communication in English. This analysis begins with a presentation of the results and an analysis of each separate question in the questionnaire and then proceeds with a final general analysis which brings up different aspects that might have affected the results.

How does it feel when you hear that you are going to speak Swedish in front of the class?

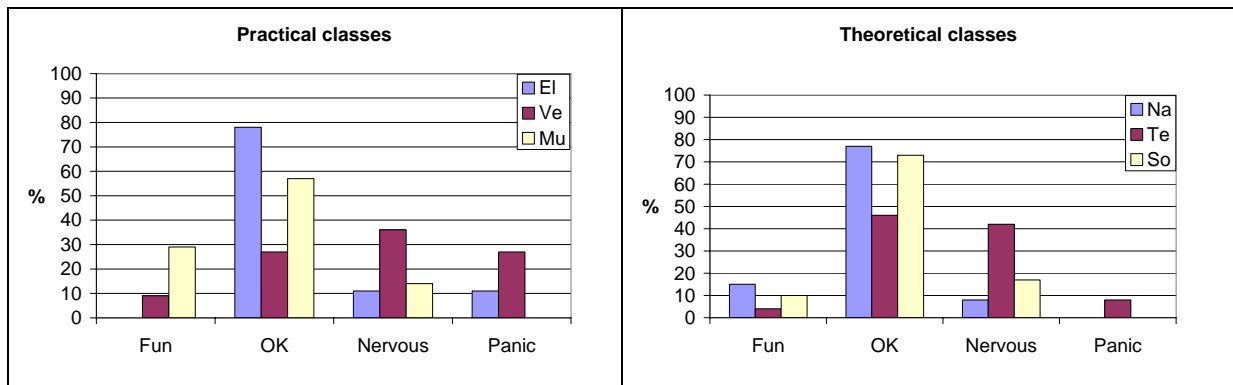


Figure 1.

When the students are asked how they feel when they hear that they are going to speak Swedish in front of the class a major part of the students in both practical and theoretical classes mention that they have nothing against it (Figure 1). A large part of the Electricity class are in the category 'OK' while the rest of the class is equally divided between the categories 'nervous' and 'panic'. The Vehicle class differs from the rest of the classes in that most students feel nervous when they have to speak Swedish in front of the class. The rest of the class is mainly in the categories 'OK' and 'panic' but a minority also in the category 'fun'. A large part of the Music class are of the opinion that it is 'OK' while a majority of the remaining students are in the category 'fun' and only a few in 'nervous'.

A majority of students in theoretical classes have nothing against speaking Swedish in front of the class. Students in the Natural Sciences class are mainly in the category 'OK' while the rest of the class is divided between the categories 'fun' and 'nervous'. In the Technology class there is an almost equal percentage of students in the categories 'OK' and 'nervous' and only a few in the category 'fun'. Finally, in the Social Sciences class the major part of the students are of the opinion that it is 'OK' to give a speech in Swedish while the rest of the class are of the opinion 'fun' or 'nervous'.

How does it feel when you hear that you are going to speak English in front of the class?

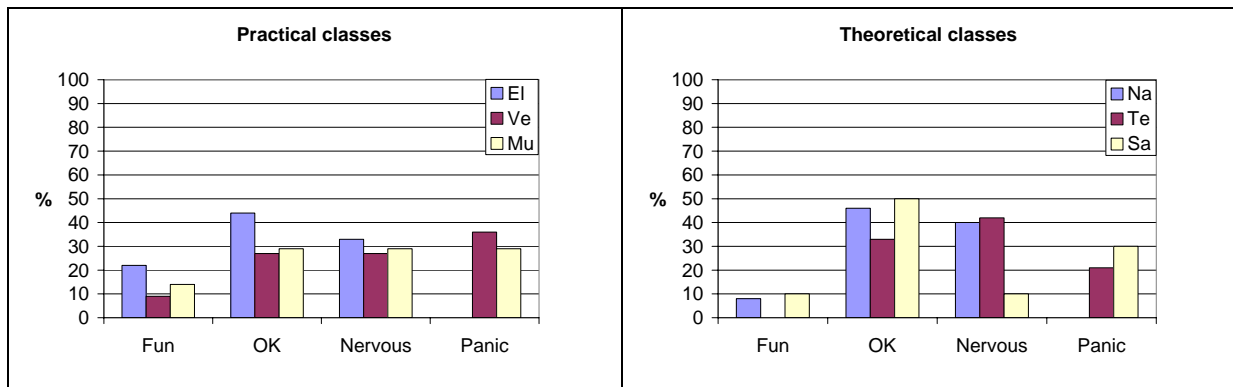


Figure 2.

Students were also asked how they feel when they hear that they are going to speak English in front of the class (Figure 2). In general, there are more students who feel uncomfortable when they are asked to give a speech in English rather than in Swedish. However, a majority of the students in the Electricity class have a positive attitude. A majority of the class have nothing against it but there are also students divided between the categories 'fun' and 'nervous'. The major part of the Vehicle class on the other hand is not as positive and is in the category 'panic'. A few students think it is 'fun' to speak English and the rest of the class is divided between the categories 'OK' and 'nervous'. In the Music class a few students think it is 'fun', while the rest of the class is divided between the categories 'OK', 'nervous' and 'panic'.

Most students in Natural Sciences and Social Sciences have nothing against speaking English in front of other people while most technology students are in the category 'nervous'. The remaining part of the Natural Sciences class is found in the category 'nervous' and only a few in 'fun'. In the Social Sciences class most of the remaining students react with 'panic' while the rest are equally divided between the categories 'fun' and 'nervous'. In the Technology class the remaining students are divided between the categories 'OK' and 'panic'. No Technology students are in the category 'fun'.

In the Electricity class some students stood out from the rest of the classes since they are in the category 'fun' when asked how they feel when they hear they are going to give a speech in English, but not when it comes to Swedish. The Electricity class also differed from the other classes in that some students feel nervous when they hear that they have to speak in their native language in front of the class (Figure 1) but not when they are going to speak English (Figure 2). This is interesting and might have to do with the fact that Swedish is their mother

tongue and these students therefore have higher expectations of themselves in Swedish. Furthermore, they might already have a lot of oral communication during the English classes. The Electricity class is moreover a small class which means that each student gets more opportunities to speak English.

Some students in the Social Sciences class react with 'panic' when they are asked to speak English (Figure 2) and this might have different explanations. It might have to do with the English language, since the students do not feel panic when they hear they are going to speak Swedish in front of the class (Figure 1). When students speak English they have to use their vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and intonation. These are things which come naturally in the native language but have to be practiced and thought about in a second language. Lack of oral communication during English lessons results in insecurity among students when they speak English. Furthermore, the Social Sciences class is a large class where the students do not have the same opportunities to speak English as they would have in a small class. It is moreover more uncomfortable to speak in front of a large number of people than in front of a small group of people. In the Technology class some students panic both when they are going to speak Swedish and English (Figures 1 & 2). This indicates that it might have to do with anxiety of speech in general. Perhaps they do not get enough practice in oral communication and therefore feel insecure. More oral exercises during both Swedish and English lessons should have a positive effect on these students.

In which way do you think it will be useful to you to be able to communicate orally in English?

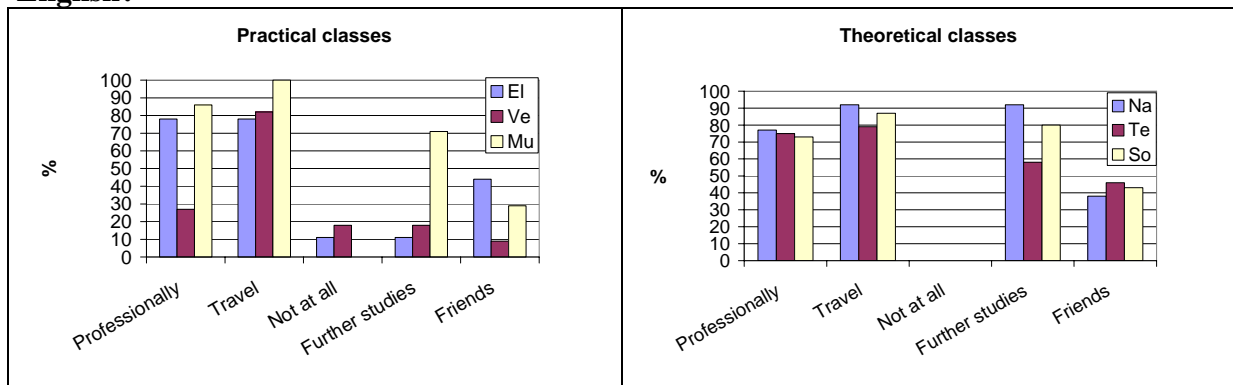


Figure 3.

Students were moreover asked in which way they thought it might be useful to be able to communicate orally in English (Figure 3). In both practical and theoretical classes students agreed that it is useful to be able to speak English when they travel but also for professional purposes. The only students who were of the opinion that it is not useful to be able to communicate orally in English were a few students in the Electricity and the Vehicle classes. Many students in the theoretical classes and the Music class and a few students in the Electricity and the Vehicle classes believed that English will be useful in further studies. All classes thought that it can be useful to be able to communicate orally in English among friends. In both practical and theoretical classes there are obviously students who know when it can be useful to be able to communicate orally in English. When students are aware of why it is good to learn a subject it is easier for them to be motivated and to learn more.

Do you think that you personally get enough opportunities to communicate orally during the English lessons at school?

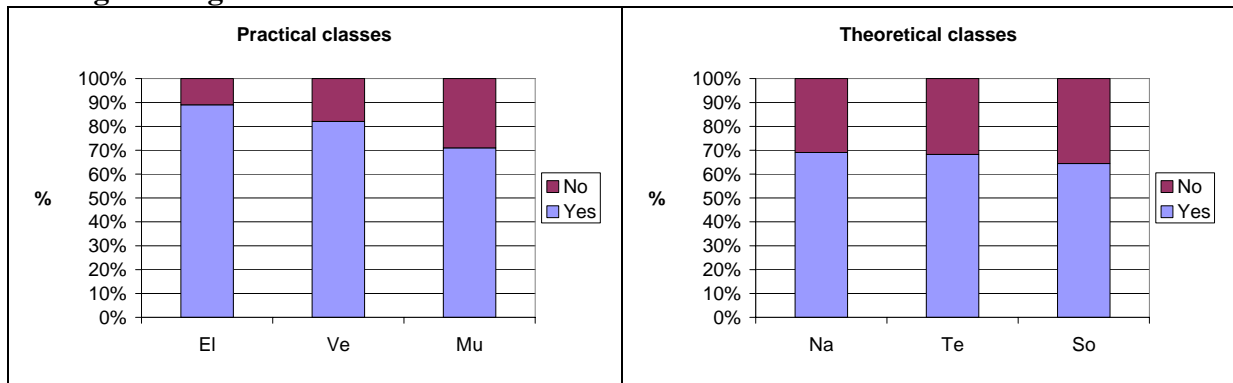


Figure 4.

When asked if the students thought that they get enough opportunities to communicate orally in English during the English lessons at school the major part of both practical and theoretical classes agreed they do (Figure 4). Practical classes were all more certain of this than theoretical classes. Among theoretical classes there were more students who disagreed.

Comments from students in the Music class were: “The entire English lesson is in English even the communication between teacher-student and student-student,” and “We try to speak English, during the entire English lesson.” Even though students in the Music class make comments like the ones above, a large part of the students in this class are in the categories ‘nervous’ and ‘panic’ (Figure 2). There might be different reasons for this. Perhaps the students expect more of themselves since they seem to practice oral communication a lot during the English lessons. On the other hand, their pronunciation might have been corrected too many times and therefore they do not feel confident when they speak English. This study does not show the grades of the students, but maybe these students have good grades in English and therefore expect more of themselves. The atmosphere in the class has also an influence on whether students feel comfortable or not in front of the class.

Among the theoretical classes students in the Social Sciences class made comments like: “We hardly ever speak English” and “If you don’t speak English you never learn how. We need to learn more pronunciation.” A large number of students in this class feel nervous when they give a speech in English in front of people (Figure 2). Despite this, a majority of the students in the Social Sciences class believe they get enough occasions for oral communication in English during the English lessons (Figure 4). Still, a majority of the students would like to have more occasions for oral communication in English (see Figure 5 below). Perhaps students who are nervous when they hear that they are going to speak English in front of the class do not get enough occasions for oral communication in English since students who already feel confident speak more during class. One student in the Social Sciences class wrote: “There are opportunities to speak English during the lessons, you just have to take them.” In this case it is possible that the students who feel insecure when speaking English do not take the chance to do so because they feel uncomfortable.

Would you like to get more opportunities for oral communication in English during the English lessons at school?

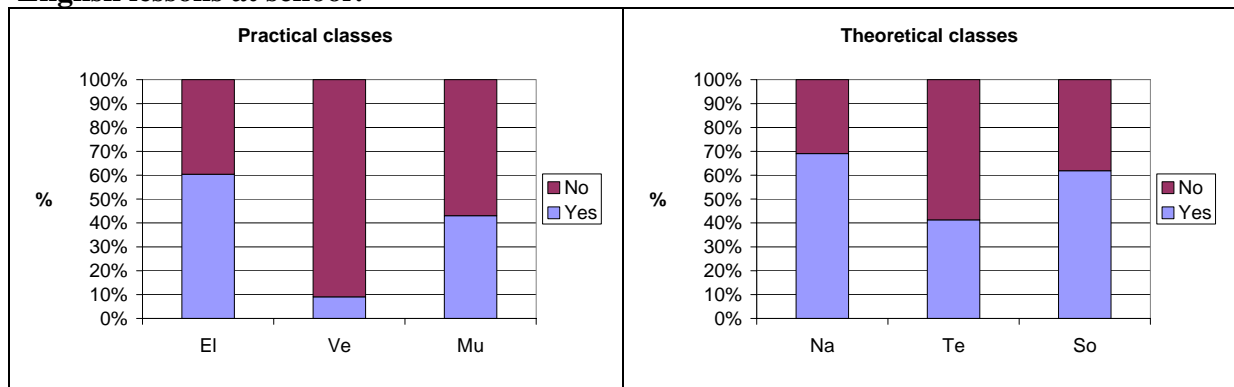


Figure 5.

When asked if the students would like to get more opportunities for oral communication in English during the English lessons at school the opinions differed (Figure 5). Among practical classes the students in the Electricity class would like to get more opportunities for oral communication while the other practical classes did not. In the Natural Sciences and the Social Sciences programs many students would like to get more opportunities for oral communication in English while students in the Technology class would not.

In the Vehicle class a majority of the students are not interested in getting more occasions for oral communication in English (Figure 5). The major part of the students in this class feels ‘nervous’ or ‘panic’ when they hear that they are going to speak Swedish and English in front of the class (Figures 1 & 2). Despite this they still think that they have enough opportunities for oral communication in English during the lessons (Figure 4).

A student in the Social Sciences class wrote: “Oral communication in English makes you think about the language and analyse things in the language.” In the Natural Sciences class, where no student are in the category ‘panic’ when they are going to speak Swedish or English in front of the class (Figures 1 & 2), a majority of the students would like to get more opportunities for oral communication in English at school (Figure 5). Perhaps the explanation is that students who already like to speak in front of other people want more opportunities while students who feel uncomfortable in the same situation avoid such situations (Figure 2). People generally do not want to put themselves in a position where they feel uneasy. The same is shown among the practical classes where no Electricity students are in the category ‘panic’ (Figure 2) and would like more opportunities for oral communication in English.

Do you think it is important to be able to communicate orally in English?

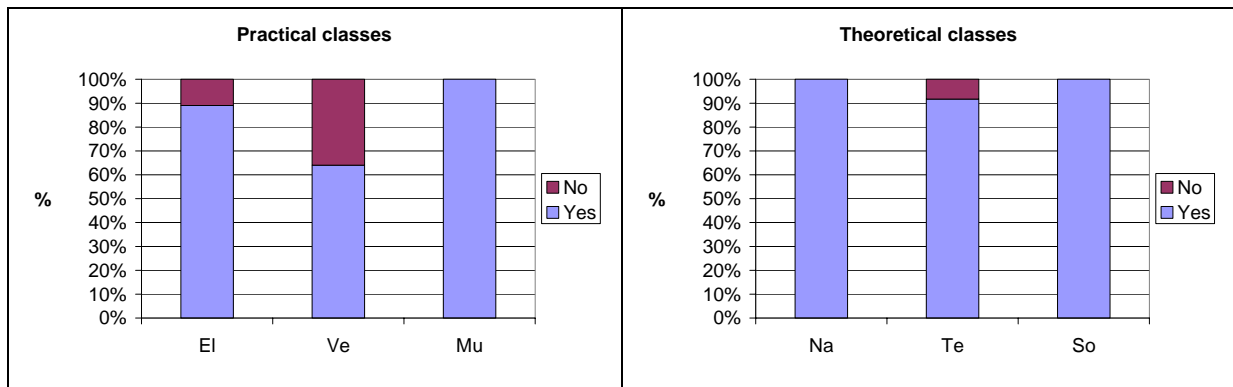


Figure 6.

In all classes a majority of the students thought it is important to be able to communicate orally in English (Figure 6). The Music class, Natural Sciences class and Social Sciences class were all a hundred percent certain of this.

Most students feel that it is important to be able to communicate orally in English. A student in the Social Sciences class wrote: “Oral communication is the most important thing in the English language.” A majority of the students find it important to be able to speak English when they travel to other countries. Moreover, they believe that it can be useful to know how to speak English for professional purposes and further studies (Figure 3). These students have grown up with TV, the Internet, cell phones and the English language is a part of their lives. On the radio English songs are played, TV shows English speaking programs and a lot of information on the Internet is in English. These days, it is also easy for people to travel to other countries where they can practice to speak English.

Do you feel confident when communicating orally in English?

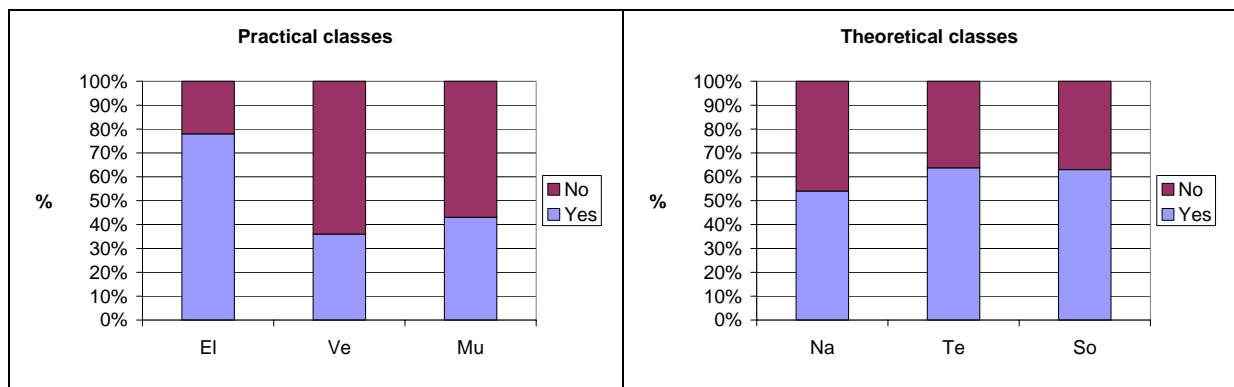


Figure 7.

Among practical classes, the Electricity class is the only one where there is a majority of students who feel confident in communicating orally in English while the other practical classes had a small majority who did not (Figure 7). Students in theoretical classes felt confident when communicating orally in English although there is only a slight majority.

A majority of the students in the Music class do not feel confident when communicating orally in English even though they believe that they get enough opportunities for oral communication during the English lessons at school (Figure 4). In the Vehicle class many students panic when they hear that they are going to speak Swedish and English in front of the class (Figures 1 & 2). The major part of the class does not feel confident in speaking English (Figure 7). A majority of the students think it is important to be able to speak English (Figure 6). Despite this they still think that they have enough opportunities for oral communication in English during the lessons (Figure 4). Moreover, a majority of the students are not interested in getting more occasions for oral communication in English (Figure 5). The panic some students in the Vehicle class feel when they are going to speak in front of the class both in Swedish and English might have to do with anxiety of speech in general. Exercises in oral communication might help these students get a more positive feeling when communicating orally. Another reason for the feeling of panic might be due to lack of interest in the English language since some students believe that they will not have any use at all of English (Figure 3).

A student in the Social Sciences class explained that she felt comfortable communicating in English by stating: “We grow up with the English language on TV and computers and that way we become better at pronunciation and vocabulary”. Another student in the same class wrote: “I feel insecure and nervous of getting things wrong when I speak English in front of

other people.” Once again, one has to keep in mind that there are students who feel insecure when communicating orally in English and they have to get more practice in order to feel more at ease in these situations.

Do you think there is an equal distribution between oral and written communication during the English lessons at school?

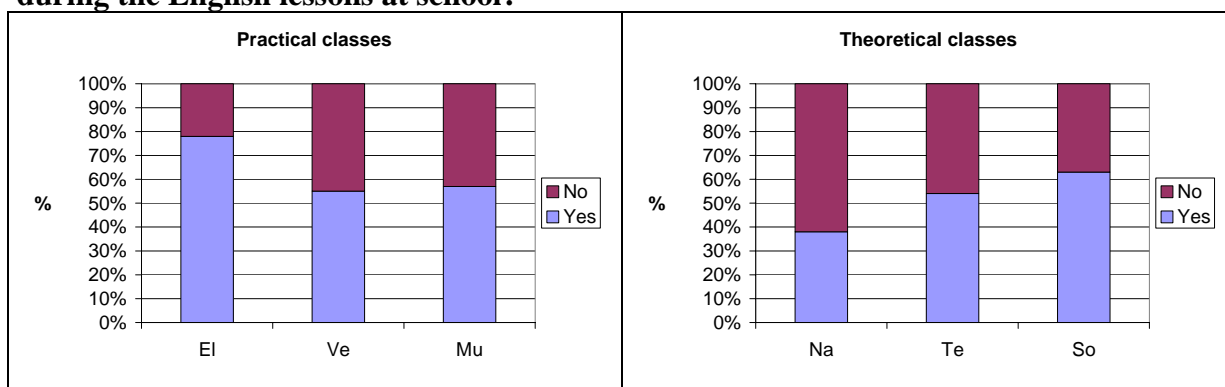


Figure 8.

All classes except the Natural Sciences class thought there is an equal distribution between oral and written communication in English at school (Figure 8). However, only in the Electricity class is there a convincing majority, while figures for the remaining classes are just above 50%. Students in the Natural Sciences class think there are more written exercises than oral communication during the English lessons.

4 Discussion

In light of the results and analysis above, it can generally be said that more students feel nervous and panic when they are going to speak English in front of the class than when they are going to speak Swedish. Swedish is their native language and they know it better than English. When speaking Swedish, they do not have to worry to the same extent about vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation and grammar. It is reasonable to believe that some of these students suffer from anxiety of speech since they are in the category ‘panic’ and ‘nervous’ when they have to speak both Swedish and English in front of other people. Moreover, a large number of students in classes with many students in the categories ‘nervous’ and ‘panic’ (Figures 1 & 2) are of the opinion that they have enough opportunities

for oral communication during the English lessons at school (Figure 5). It can be assumed that these students do not want more opportunities for oral communication in English since they find it uncomfortable to speak it. In general people try to avoid uncomfortable situations (Ostrowski, 2001:119).

This study does not show what kind of nervousness the students feel when they hear they are going to speak in front of other people. To feel a little nervous is normal before a performance and makes the speaker more alert and focused. Furthermore, some people are shy by nature and do not enjoy speaking in public (Strömquist, 1998:94-95). Anxiety of speech, though, makes a person feel very uncomfortable when speaking in front of others and is a problem which might follow that person through his or her entire life (Rudberg, 1982:53-65).

A significant majority of the students in both practical and theoretical classes believe it is useful and important to be able to speak English. These students are exposed to the English language through music, the Internet, TV, literature and travel. As a consequence of this they know why it is useful to know how to use the English language in different situations.

Furthermore, a majority of students in both practical and theoretical classes think they get enough opportunities to speak English in school. As was pointed out earlier, one has to keep in mind that people try to avoid uncomfortable situations and it can be assumed that some students try to avoid speaking English since they feel insecure. If this assumption is correct, students who are in desperate need of practice in oral communication try to avoid communicative situations. Moreover, the above assumption is strengthened by the fact that in classes with students in the categories 'nervous' and 'panic' (Figures 1 & 2) a majority of students would not like to get more opportunities for oral communication. Students who have nothing against speaking in front of the class are of the opinion that they would like more opportunities to speak English (Figure 5).

Students in all theoretical classes and also in the Electricity class feel confident when they speak English. This study does not show how the teachers in these classes work. Some classes in this study may already have teachers who provide many opportunities for oral communication during the English lessons while other classes do not have the same opportunities. In order to become a confident oral communicator practice is needed. There are many things students need to get used to in order to feel at ease when they speak English in

front of the class. Among other things, they have to get used to speaking the language. To speak English requires knowledge of intonation, pronunciation and the ability to find the right words. It also requires that the grammar, which students in written exercises have time to think about, comes immediately when something has to be said. Oral exercises in English are good practice for the different parts of the English language even if written exercises are just as important. In order to feel comfortable in front of the class students furthermore need to get used to being the center of attention. Practice of performing in front of the class or in smaller groups in different situations might help.

The atmosphere in the class might also affect oral communication. A positive atmosphere with supporting comments makes it easier for students to speak in front of the class. To stand alone in front of a group of people is a feeling which most people are not used to. It puts the person in front of the group, in the center of attention, at the same time as the person is separated from the group (Rogers, 1989:19-22). Negative comments during a speech make the situation even worse for the person who is doing the talking. Observations in the class would give a deeper understanding of the classroom situation. Furthermore, it has to be mentioned that this study does not show if students have a more positive feeling towards speaking English in pairs or smaller groups than towards speaking English in front of larger groups. Sometimes students who feel uncomfortable when they have to speak in front of the class are very sociable and talkative among friends. Such students should have the opportunity to practice oral communication together with friends in smaller groups during English lessons. There are plenty of good exercises in oral communication which are well suited for that purpose.

The size of the class plays an important role when it comes to practicing oral communication during the English lessons. In a small class there are more opportunities for students to speak. Moreover, most people find it easier to speak in front of a small group of people than a large number of people. In a small class the teacher has the ability to pay attention to every student and it is easier to perform communicative exercises.

In absence of complementary comments to the questions in the questionnaire, from the students in the Vehicle and the Technology classes, important information might be missing. Comments from these students might have given a deeper understanding of the results. However, it can be assumed that students in these classes might have a poor interest in the

English language. It is furthermore not known in what way the questionnaire was introduced to the students since the teacher of each class presented it. Even though each teacher had instructions on how to present it different factors might have affected it. Perhaps some teachers simply handed out the questionnaires in a hurry in order to go on with the lesson as quickly as possible while other teachers pointed out the importance of giving complementary comments to the questions. Looking back it would have been better to have handed out the questionnaires in person since it would have been done in the same way in every class.

5 Summary and conclusions

The aim of this work was to study students' opinions about oral communication during English lessons at Senior High School. In the communicative society we live in today it is important that people have the ability to communicate orally in English. It gives advantages in many different situations. The curriculum clearly states that Senior High School should develop the oral communication and social competence of the students. It has been shown that this is not always the case. Research shows that the typical communication in a classroom is a one-way communication where the teacher talks and the students are given the opportunity to say a few words.

This study has focused on investigating how students in three practical classes and three theoretical classes in their final year of Senior High School feel when they have to communicate orally in English at school. It has also discussed their opinions about oral communication in general and if they think it is an equal distribution between oral communication and written exercises during their English lessons. A questionnaire filled out by students showed that a majority of them, in both practical and theoretical classes, have nothing against speaking Swedish in front of the class but when it comes to speaking English more students have difficulties with that and feel nervous or even panic. Despite the fact that many students feel nervous or panic when they have to speak English a majority of them still believe that they get enough opportunities for oral communication in English during the English lessons. The present study has shown that many students in the theoretical classes in particular feel confident when they communicate in English.

The fact that many students in the theoretical classes, which were part of this study, answered that they feel nervous when they are asked to give a speech in English but at the same time say that they feel comfortable when speaking English might have to do with a number of things. One possible reason is anxiety of speech, others may be related to the size of the group, the general atmosphere in the classroom or previous experience of talking English in front of other people. It is normal to feel a little nervous before a performance. Anxiety of speech is different since it makes a person feel extremely uncomfortable when speaking in front of other people. This study has not shown whether the nervousness comes from anxiety of speech or if it is a natural excitement which normally occurs in these situations. In a class with many students it is more difficult for each student to get enough opportunities for oral communication. Students in a large class moreover have to speak in front of a larger number of people which might make them feel uncomfortable. It is not only the size of the class but also the atmosphere in the class which affects a student's willingness to speak freely in front of his or her school mates. In a positive class atmosphere among supporting classmates it is easier to feel comfortable. To be able to feel confident when speaking English practice is needed and oral exercises in English should be a natural part of the lesson.

Many students in this study answered that they would like to get more opportunities to speak English in school. However, a majority of students in all classes except the Social Science class think that there is an equal share between oral communication and written exercises during the English lessons. English is one of the major languages in the world today and is therefore an extremely important language to know. The students in this study agree that it is important to be able to speak English, for professional purposes, travel, in further studies and among friends.

Further research in this area could look at why students are more nervous when they have to speak English than when they have to speak Swedish in front of other people since, at the same time, they say that they feel confident when speaking English. Another field of research could be to repeat this study but at the same time make observations and interviews in the class. In such a way it would become clearer how the teacher works in class and what the atmosphere in the class is like. This is an interesting subject and an important one to investigate more since anxiety of speech might affect the entire life of people. Yet another interesting field of research is to work with different kinds of communicative exercises during English lessons and see how that might affect the students during a longer period of time.

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Appendix Questionnaire

1) Är du kille eller tjej?

2) Vilken linje och vilket år går du?

Linje:..... År:.....

3) Hur känns det när du hör att ni ska redovisa muntligt på svenska inför klassen?

Roligt OK Nervöst Panik

4) Hur känns det när du hör att ni ska redovisa muntligt på engelska inför klassen?

Roligt OK Nervöst Panik

5) På vilket sätt tror du att du kommer att ha användning av att kunna kommunicera muntligt på engelska?

Yrkeslivet Resor Inte alls Fortsatta studier
 Vänner Annat.....

6) Tycker du att du personligen får tillräckliga möjligheter att kommunicera muntligt på engelsklektionerna i skolan?

Ja Nej

Motivering.....

.....

7) Skulle du vilja ha fler tillfällen till muntlig kommunikation på engelsklektionerna i skolan?

Ja Nej

Motivering.....

.....

8) Tycker du att det är viktigt att kunna kommunicera muntligt på engelska?

Ja Nej

Motivering.....

.....

9) Känner du dig trygg i att kommunicera muntligt på engelska?

Ja Nej

Motivering.....

.....

10) Tycker du att det är en jämn fördelning mellan muntlig och skriftlig kommunikation på engelsklektionerna i skolan?

Ja Nej

Motivering.....

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