

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
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SPEAKING TASKS
IN FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE EFL CLASSROOMS –
AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis concentrates on the study of speaking tasks in face-to-face and synchronous online classrooms which was done among seventh graders in a basic school in Tartu. The aim the thesis is to find techniques that encourage students to speak in the target language in English as a foreign language (EFL) lessons, see how speaking in pairs and groups affects practicing speaking skill, and to find solutions to issues which might occur while conducting speaking tasks either in face-to-face or online classrooms.

This thesis consists of six parts: an introduction, a literature review, a methodology, the analysis of results, and a conclusion. The introduction focuses on the background of the study and the speaking skill in general. The literature review provides an overview of the speaking skill in the context of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) and the National curriculum for basic schools (2011). It also introduces the differences between face-to-face and online classrooms, issues that affect students while speaking, insight on pair and group work, and speaking tasks. The methodology section deals with the action research method used in the study, the study itself, and the analysis of the research journal. The analysis of the results shows the categories which emerged from the students' feedback questionnaire answers and the analysis of the results. The summary of the main findings of the thesis is provided in the conclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

The English language is taught in Estonian schools from the first stage of the study, and it is the foreign language A in most Estonian schools (National curriculum 2011: Division 7). Teaching the language includes many different aspects and traditionally, four language skills are taught (Luoma 2004: 41). These are receptive skills, i.e., listening and reading, and productive skills, that is writing and speaking (Bailey 2003: 48). The main emphasis in this thesis is on the productive skill of speaking as this is hardest to acquire (Bailey 2003: 48; Pawlak 2018: 270), especially due to the lack of practice in our mostly Estonian-speaking language environment. The speaking skill is also “the most difficult to test” (Foot 1999: 36). To improve students’ confidence and motivation in speaking English, action research was done in a basic school in Tartu by using different speaking tasks and analyzing the outcomes.

Originally, all tasks were to be used in a face-to-face classroom, and the study itself was to have its focus only on speaking tasks. Because of today’s situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, education in Estonia moved online December 14, 2020 and the lessons were given from a distance. Distance learning has been around for some time in universities both asynchronously, in which case the students work independently to a set deadline, and synchronously via video conferencing technology (Hoffman 2018; Hu 2015; Sobko et al. 2020; Weiser et al. 2018). In the case of this study, speaking tasks were done both synchronously via online video conferencing software Zoom and in face-to-face classrooms.

When studying in a face-to-face classroom, speaking tasks are relatively easy to adapt as students sit together; however, when studying online, solutions need to be found for how to mimic the physical classroom situation. Unlike other language skills, speaking is the only one that requires learning in real time with students and the teacher (Bailey 2003: 48). In a synchronous online classroom, it is easier to keep the distance which is why the

eagerness of students to participate may start playing a role (Weiser et al. 2018: 40). Many students participate but do not turn on their cameras or microphones which complicates doing speaking tasks even more (Gherheş et al. 2021: 12). In addition to problems with participation, technology is often unreliable, and the internet connection may be unstable. Furthermore, when the teacher is preoccupied with helping some students, sharing materials, or waiting for the internet to connect, other students lack the attention in the online setting that they desperately need and would receive in a physical classroom.

Learning happens in a classroom where students feel comfortable. When students are required to speak in class, for example, to answer the teacher's question or to present their ideas, some of them experience discomfort or anxiety. Stephen Krashen focused on the theory of affective filter, which "captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition" (Krashen 1982: 31), and that when it is low, children are more inclined to learn. A similar problem was discussed by Horwitz et al. (1986: 125) who stated that when students feel reluctant to speak, it blocks the overall ability to learn the language. Moreover, in some classes, not all students get the opportunity to participate, as there are many students in the classroom, only one teacher, and limited time. Therefore, practicing speaking is a way to reduce anxiety among students when speaking in class. This speaking must be goal-oriented, clearly thought through, and implemented logically into the lesson for it to provide full learning potential. Therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to choose suitable speaking tasks and ways how to conduct speaking tasks. Sharon Ahlquist's (2019) project on using *Storyline* with her students showed how a well-planned activity can help increase students' confidence when speaking.

The current thesis aims at finding techniques on how to conduct speaking tasks so that students would feel more comfortable speaking in both face-to-face and online classrooms. The research questions in this thesis are:

1. How to encourage students to speak in a target language in class?
2. How does speaking in pairs/groups affect practicing the speaking skill?
3. Which problems occur while conducting speaking tasks in a face-to-face classroom or online environment?

To find answers to the research questions, I conducted action research as this is a methodology that enables the author to research their practice “through a solution-oriented approach” (Cousin 2009: 149). The study was done in a basic school in Tartu with 21 seventh graders. The speaking tasks I chose were comparison, storytelling, information gap, and discussion task. They were used in four lessons. The pilot task and the first task were done via online video conferencing software Zoom, and the second and third tasks in a face-to-face classroom. This action research focuses on performing speaking tasks to see how students react and participate in the tasks and improving the structure of the tasks after each time during the four lessons allocated to these tasks. The methodology chosen is also useful because it is required for me, as a future teacher, to be able to conduct action research to analyze learning processes and find solutions to different issues occurring in the classroom (Occupational Qualification Standards 2020: B.2.4.).

Data was gathered via a feedback questionnaire that students filled out after each speaking task where they reflected on the given task instructions, expressed opinions on the task itself, and wrote how they felt while speaking. Additionally, I kept a research journal, and after each task, created an entry by answering pre-formulated questions. The results of the action research provide answers to my research questions and show which problems to pay attention to when conducting speaking tasks. Moreover, the results demonstrate whether my activities as a teacher, such as the different techniques I used, helped students become more confident in speaking.

In the first part of this thesis, the speaking skill and its necessity to practice are discussed along with the anxiety that speaking in class brings. Also, the online classroom environment is further examined. The empirical part features the background of the action research that was used for the study to help students become more comfortable and acquainted with speaking in the classroom. In the third part, the results of the feedback questionnaires are concentrated on and analyzed more thoroughly. The thesis ends with a conclusion and suggestions for further research.

1. TEACHING THE SPEAKING SKILL

Speaking is a skill that involves the use of several processes in real time by activating previous knowledge and formulating it into a coherent outcome (Burns 2019: 2). The speaking skill can be defined in many ways; I, however, rely on the definition of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (hereafter CEFR). The CEFR is a document widely used to “[contribute] to the implementation of the Council of Europe’s language education principles, including the promotion of reflective learning and learner autonomy” (Council of Europe 2020: 13). It is also used in Estonia as a document to aid foreign language teachers. According to the CEFR, speaking skill consists of two parts – spoken interaction and spoken production. Interaction is when “at least two individuals participate in an oral and/or written exchange in which production and reception alternate and may in fact overlap in oral communication” (Council of Europe 2001: 14). In spoken production “the language user produces an oral text which is received by an audience of one or more listeners” (Council of Europe 2001: 58), for example, giving information, instructions, or presentations.

In language learning, it is important to use the language and speaking forms a part of communication competence. According to the National curriculum for basic schools (2011), students must master communication competence which can be defined as the

ability to clearly and relevantly express oneself, taking into account situations and partners in communication; to present and justify their positions; to read and understand information and literature; to write different types of texts, using appropriate linguistic devices and a suitable style; to prioritize correct use of language and rich expressive language. (National curriculum for basic schools 2011: Division 2)

The communication competence consists of general competences, communicative language competences, communicative language activities, and communicative language strategies, which each have their specific categorizations (Council of Europe 2020: 32). In the 2020 edition of the document, the communicative language activities and strategies have

replaced the traditional model of the four language skills to capture the complex reality of communication (Council of Europe 2020: 33). Still, the four language skills are used in an integrated manner to teach communicative competence (National curriculum 2011, Appendix 2: 2). The skills mentioned are: 1) receptive skills, reading and listening, and 2) productive skills, writing and speaking. In this thesis, the term speaking skill is mainly used to emphasize its role in the four original core skills and communicative competence as the broader umbrella term. It has been stated that learning a new language is more effective when learners use the target language in productive tasks (Zhang & Head 2010: 2). Although both receptive and productive learning are focused on, it is usually the latter that has the outcome of “stronger knowledge” (Griffin & Harley 1996, cited in Nation 2007: 5).

Contemporary teaching methods are learner-centered which aids the communicative needs of students. To have a learner-centered study environment, active learning is applied and that includes pair and group work which helps students become more motivated and independent (National curriculum 2011, Appendix 2: 5). Moreover, in 2011, action research was done with Japanese students to improve their speaking skills (Talandis Jr & Stout 2015: 12). The authors shifted their “focus of instruction /.../ to interactional English” by personalizing topics, giving direct instruction of pragmatics, and doing frequent oral assessments (Talandis Jr & Stout 2015: 12). The study done in this thesis has similar aims: 1) to create comfortable learning environments in both synchronous online and face-to-face classrooms; 2) to provide students with the opportunity to practice speaking in English in pairs and groups; and 3) to use well-thought-out speaking tasks. The emphasis is on the opportunity to practice speaking because speaking is improved “by talking, not by listening to the teacher talk” (Meng 2009: 222), as the latter tends to dominate the whole lesson (Bailey 2003: 55). Therefore, it is the teacher’s responsibility to “create an atmosphere in which learners are encouraged to talk in English and are praised for talking” (Meng 2009:

223). Knowing the language structure is important; however, using it is more important (National curriculum 2011, Appendix 2: 2).

This chapter focuses on the information the existing literature has about face-to-face and online environments of teaching since lessons now take place in both environments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the emphasis is on the students and how they feel about speaking in a foreign language in class. Also, pair and group work are concentrated on as they are a part of learner-centered teaching. Finally, different speaking tasks and their similarities are addressed.

1.1 The Environment of Speaking

Teaching and studying happen in many different environments, either in a traditional face-to-face classroom, which offers interaction in person between the students and teacher (Gherheș et al. 2021: 2), or online via video conferencing software. With today's COVID-19 pandemic, many school lessons in Estonia are conducted synchronously via video conferencing platforms or asynchronously where students work in their own time. The role of online learning and online collaboration has been increasing for some time, even before COVID-19 (Hoffman 2018; Sobko et al. 2020). Synchronous video conferencing classes have also been used in open or online courses in universities (Alizadeh 2012; Sobko et al. 2020). Learning together simultaneously in an online setting in the formal education context can be characterized as “two or more individuals (often students and teachers) working together, most often synchronously, to construct shared meaning or acquire new knowledge that leads towards accomplishing a shared goal” (Sobko et al. 2020: 38). Synchronous learning takes place in an online classroom where lessons are “broadcast at the same time they are given” (Great Schools Partnership 2013).

In a recent study done by Gherheş et al. (2021) on comparing face-to-face learning and online learning amongst university students in Romania, participants said face-to-face classes offer more communication with peers and practical approaches than online lessons, although they enjoyed the benefits of saving time and staying at home to study (Gherheş et al. 2021: 12). There are possibilities to help make synchronous online lessons less disconnected and more like face-to-face classes. Emily Brown Hoffman (2018: 179) has proposed a way of adapting online learning to make it more collaborative and less disconnected by proposing to use different semiotic modes. Khodaparast and Ghafournia (2015: 125) agree with Hoffman in their research, saying that a synchronous approach allows students to receive immediate feedback from teachers and fellow students which helps with language learning. Weiser et al. (2018) have researched how personality traits, medium naturalness, and teaching-learning interactions influence participation during synchronous e-learning sessions. They discovered that although the acquaintance between students results in higher participation, it is the pedagogical elements that “promote participation in online learning environments” such as creating tasks where collaboration and discussion are incorporated (Weiser et al. 2018: 50).

Therefore, synchronous online classroom offers many advantages, and it has become a great asset in today’s world, providing the students with a safe way to learn in their own homes. Even if synchronous online lessons are not completely new, there is still not much research done on the issues teachers and students face while being in an online lesson. This might be problematic for teachers who have not come across such teaching before and need more guidance. The same applies to students who are not used to participating via video conferencing software as they might lose focus or be unwilling to talk. Moreover, a synchronous online class is mainly dependent on technology which means technical issues are very likely to occur (Gherheş et al. 2021: 2). However, when using the right technology

available, online learning can prove to be very useful “to establish a new socially present relationship between students and teachers in a virtual environment” (Hu 2015: 19).

Talking to teachers and classmates via video conferencing software helps students practice English and it allows them to continue learning the language in a way that is similar to a face-to-face classroom (Hoffman 2018: 180). When choosing which software to use, it is helpful to think whether it has the necessary features, is easy to use, and is free of charge. There are many video conferencing platforms available today, but I am focusing on two that are most known to me – Google Meet which was used in the school I did the study and Zoom. Google Meet is widely used because it is free, secure, and easy to use (Google Meet 2021). The meeting can last for one hour with a maximum of 100 people present; everyone can share their screen and use the chat (Google Meet 2021). Google Meet enables its users to create breakout rooms during a meeting but only in a paid version. Breakout rooms are an important feature in video conferencing software since it allows pair and group work to occur. The teacher can create separate rooms from the main room and send students to work there. Unlike the students, the teacher can visit all rooms and see the work their students do. Zoom, like Google Meet, is an online video conferencing software. Zoom has features like screen-sharing, chat, and it allows to create breakout rooms in a free version (Zoom 2021). Creating breakout rooms on Zoom is easy and quick, and they can be formed either automatically or manually. The only issue is that without a premium version, a Zoom session can only last 40 minutes with more than three people present. Thus, Google Meet offers a good platform to do the whole lesson but Zoom presents the opportunity to do the speaking tasks.

Distance learning has become topical over the last year and video conferencing software allows to conduct synchronous lessons all over the world. Synchronous lessons offer collaborative work that is similar in distance learning to the structure students would

get in a face-to-face classroom. Still, it is important to see how students are accustomed to doing speaking tasks in both environments.

1.2 Speaking in Class

It is important to have a natural, stress-free environment for learning a foreign language, especially when speaking skills are focused on. Students often freeze when they need to speak in front of the whole class either in a face-to-face classroom or in an online one. They can become anxious, nervous, reluctant, or avoid speaking altogether (Horwitz et al. 1986: 125). There are many reasons for this. Ahlquist (2019: 388) states that “the prospect of peer ridicule and public correction by the teacher can cause reluctance to speak”. Paran (2012: 452) adds that compared to writing tasks, “speaking /.../ can never be retracted or erased” and for that reason, some learners fear losing respect. Anxiety can also be caused by the students’ shyness and not feeling comfortable speaking in front of any kind of audience (Harmer 2015: 386). In addition to feeling anxious and having the fear of embarrassing oneself, reluctance to speak might be caused by “learners’ inability to understand what the teacher is saying [and] teachers’ low tolerance of silence” (Zhang & Head 2010: 2). When students make a pause longer than one second after a question has been asked, an error while responding, or when they do not know the answer altogether teachers usually “interrupt, repeat, or rephrase the question, ask a different one, ‘correct’, and/or switch to another student” (Long & Porter 1985: 211). For some students, when participation is not obligatory, they tend to be more passive as it is safer for them to not speak and thus not be open to criticism or ridicule (Zhang & Head 2010: 2). Passiveness and shyness can be seen in synchronous online lessons where students usually do not turn on their cameras, as it is easier

not to be seen (Gherheş et al. 2021: 13). Therefore, teachers' actions in the class play a substantial role, especially when helping students feel less anxious.

Low anxiety is helpful while learning a language “whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety” (Krashen 1982: 31). The same has been stated by Horwitz et al. (1986: 128) – feeling anxious in class causes learners to have difficulty in learning a foreign language. Krashen explains this in *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (1982) within the affective filter theory. It states that

the Affective Filter hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter — even if they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device. (Krashen 1982: 31)

This means that negative emotions and feelings prevent learning from being as effective as it would be when the affective filter was low with only study-conducive attitudes present. Students need to be encouraged to speak in the classroom (Paran 2012: 452) and, additionally, their willingness to communicate needs to be increased. Willingness to communicate, referred to as WTC is seen as the “probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so” (MacIntyre et al. 1998: 546). A person's WTC might be influenced by the communicator's relationship, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, the topic (MacIntyre et al. 1998: 546), and the “learner's perception of their own communicative competence” (Ockert 2015: 49).

Teachers can help reduce the anxiety of their students by increasing their willingness to communicate and keeping the affective filter low. Barley Mak (2011: 212) suggests “allowing learners to use their [mother tongue, abbreviated as] L1 in the ESL classroom [as it] will build up learners' confidence and, in turn, encourage speaking”. Although it is wise to use the target language for the majority of the time, sometimes, especially in lower language level classes, it might put some pressure on the students. Furthermore, it is advised

for the students to have enough time to prepare when they are required to speak in front of a classroom (Mak 2011: 212). However, it is important to note that using the target language should still be the main priority, otherwise students might feel too comfortable using their L1 and not develop their target language skills. Additionally, the key lies in preparation because when students know exactly what is expected of them, they will feel more comfortable speaking as confusion might cause stress (Harmer 2015: 386). The teacher must give as precise instructions as possible, so the students know exactly how and what to do.

1.3 Pair and Group Work

Performing in front of the whole class is something that may cause anxiety even in the best language learners and it is something that needs to be considered. Speaking in pairs/groups offers a way to practice the target language without the anxiety of speaking alone in front of the whole class (Harmer 2015: 386). Speaking in a group creates a more relaxed study environment, and it gives students more time to practice the language in class. Students can aid each other by sharing knowledge and making it easier to solve certain problems. Some theories provide an explanation for the different benefits of learners working together, like the theory of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). This theory was developed by Lev Vygotsky and “it is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky 1978: 86). When interacting with a more competent partner, the target-like language is more likely to be used (Chen 2017: 329). The zone of proximal development “focuses on the nature of the concrete dialogic relationship

between expert and novice” and it aims towards helping the novice become more proficient and gaining better self-regulation (Lantolf & Thorne 2007: 209–210).

The positive aspects of group (and pair) work have been proven pedagogically (Ahlquist 2019; Long & Porter 1985; Meng 2009). Group work increases the quantities to practice language, creates a positive affective atmosphere, helps to increase student motivation, and improves the quality of student talk along with providing the individualization of instruction (Long & Porter 1985: 207). Group work is less teacher- and more learner-centered and task-based (Meng 2009: 220). This allows students to be more self-sufficient and rely on each other more than the teacher. The teacher’s role is to guide the students so they could work together efficiently. Another positive aspect of working either in pairs or groups is that students are not in the center of attention as they would be when they would have to answer the teacher’s question in front of the whole class. In group work, students focus more on the content and finishing the task than the way they express themselves (Ahlquist 2019: 394). When students work in groups it is important to make it as efficient as possible. For example, “setting up a monitoring system” is a good and practical strategy (Meng 2009: 223). Every student in the group will have a specific task they have to do, which will help the students be more productive (Meng 2009: 221). One solution, for example, is to have one student monitor time, another do the writing, the third perform their findings and ask them all to come up with ideas.

Much depends on the pair/group the students work in; working in pairs generally helps students share anxiety, thus creating a more relaxed environment (Foot 1999: 37). Sometimes the linguistic performance may be affected by whether the students who are paired up know each other or not (Norton 2005: 287). Even though students feel safer when they get to choose their partners, it does not mean that the willingness to communicate will be better (Ahlquist 2019: 388). However, students usually feel more comfortable having had

the chance to choose their partners and groupmates (Chen 2017: 339; Meng 2009: 223). Therefore, doing pair and group work for practicing speaking offers a great solution to the anxiety students feel. It is even better to give students different roles during group work to maximize efficiency. Although it is good for students to speak with different classmates, they usually feel more comfortable when they choose their partners or groupmates.

1.4 Speaking Tasks

There are many speaking activities and tasks that can be focused on while conducting them in the lesson. However, there is a difference between activity and task. Activities refer to different work done with no particular or only some purpose (Prabhat 2016). However, tasks have a clear purpose, and “speaking tasks can be seen as activities that involve speakers in using language to achieve a particular goal or objective in a particular speaking situation” (Luoma 2004: 31). Therefore, when doing speaking tasks, students are not just practicing speaking but using the language to achieve a certain goal.

The tasks and activities themselves must be appealing and motivating. Students must have an interest in the topic because when people are interested, they want to show their ability and skills (Meng 2009: 222). Usually, it is the teacher who chooses the topic. However, asking the students about the topics they like include them too. Tasks that students find interesting “ensure participation, encourage negotiation and feedback, improve students’ attitude [towards] learning and suit some learners’ preferred interaction styles” (Meng 2009: 221). Captivating tasks also help achieve the goal of the speaking task (Nation 1989: 24). Moreover, when students enjoy the task, it will help reduce the anxiety and allow students to practice the target language more. Usually, many students do not get the opportunity to use the target language outside the classroom which leaves minimal exposure

to it (Shumin 2002, cited in Pawlak 2018: 270). For that reason, the students need to work together to maximize the amount of speaking done during the language lesson.

There are many different types of tasks in the National curriculum (2011, Appendix 2: 5, 9, 11), such as role plays, discussions, project learning, and oral presentations. Also, students can practice speaking through dialogues, interviews, talking about themselves, describing a photo or picture, narrating a story, giving instructions, comparing, contrasting, explaining, and deciding (Luoma 2004: 139–151). These types of tasks are not only used in class for practice but in oral examinations as well. Testing usually takes place in “live, face-to-face interaction” (Luoma 2004: 44) and it might be stressful for the examinee to speak without previous practice. Thus, it is useful to conduct similar types of speaking tasks in class to help students be more prepared and reduce anxiety when speaking tests take place.

Most speaking tasks have different features in common. Students either have different kinds of information which they must share, they need to discuss or create something out of existing information, or they must find information together. As the purpose of speaking tasks is to help students grasp communication competence (National curriculum 2011: Division 2), it is good to look at communicative language teaching where all speaking tasks have three features in common. The features mentioned by Morrow are information gap, choice, and feedback (Johnson & Morrow 1981, cited in Larsen-Freeman 2000: 129). Under the information gap students can “exchange information, and at times, solve problems” (Chappell 2014: 5). This means one student possesses information the other needs so communication must happen. Choice means that the task should not be too controlled to avoid students not having free communication (Johnson & Morrow 1981, cited in Larsen-Freeman 2000: 129). Finally, while communicating in pairs students must give feedback to each other to see whether their ideas have been understood. Paul Nation (1989: 28) talked about five features that might be present in speaking tasks. Like Morrow (Johnson

& Morrow 1981, cited in Larsen-Freeman 2000: 129), there were roles and split information. Moreover, Nation (1989: 28) believed that an activity must have an outcome, therefore a purpose or reason for doing it. The last two features in speaking tasks are procedure and challenges. The procedure follows all the instructions through what is expected of the students (*ibid.*). Challenges are given to the students in the task to overcome, such as time restriction (*ibid.*). This thesis focuses on comparing–contrasting, giving instructions, and discussion. These three types which contain information gap differ in their level of difficulty and give students the opportunity to tackle speaking from different aspects.

This chapter provided an overview of different sources on the environment of speaking tasks, the issues students face and the speaking tasks. The thesis will now focus on the study done for it. The next chapter discusses the action research done in January 2021. The background of action research and the study is presented along with data collection, participants, and the discussion of the cycles of the study.

2. CONDUCTING THE ACTION RESEARCH

The study for this thesis was conducted using action research where the researcher views certain issues and acts to better the situation by constantly learning from their previous actions and thus analyzing and perfecting the plan. This method was chosen because the ability to analyze and improve one's work is the basis of every teacher's mandatory competence. According to Occupational Qualification Standards: Teacher, EstQF Level 7 (2020) a teacher

reflects one's own work, including analyzing the effect of teaching, using different methods, regularly collects feedback about learners' learning activities and results, and according to that plan changes in teaching and education process; analyses and interprets the results of educational research and applies them in his/her work; **conducts action research on class/group level** [emphasis mine], analyzing learning process, defining problems, collecting evidence from practice; sharing evidence-based knowledge with colleagues. (Occupational Qualification Standards 2020)

The concept of keeping the teaching methods up to date and constantly reviewing the work done is written into the mandatory competence of a teacher and the action research in this thesis is to help prepare for my future work. Additionally, the benefits of action research can be seen in teachers feeling "more confident, connected to their students, research-engaged, and recognized by colleagues and managers" (Edwards & Burns 2016: 6).

The term was first used by social psychologist Kurt Lewin who in the late 1930s conducted "quasi-experimental tests in factory and neighborhood settings" (Adelman 1993: 7). Lewin described the core of the research as "only part of a process of social planning, reconnaissance /.../, followed by review and iteration of this overall cycle" (ibid.: 14). His idea was that action research involves the active participation of people who identify certain problems and work towards solving them (ibid.: 9). Due to its main process of practicing, constant improvement of methods, and finding new ways to enrich a certain field, action research is the perfect methodology to use in teaching.

Action research is always started by the people who are involved in a situation where a certain issue or problem is present. Teachers are usually engaged in many different situations where they need to solve problems or find better solutions. So, action research plays a huge role in teachers' work as it "is intended to support teachers and groups of teachers, in coping with the challenges and problems of practice and carrying through innovations in a reflective way" (Altrichter et al. 2005: 4). The systematic method that action research provides is very useful for teachers to analyze the problem more thoroughly, constantly making changes, and overseeing the progress it achieves. The most important part of action research is not the research itself but rather the constant reflection of one's actions and then bringing change through these actions (Altrichter et al. 2005: 5–6). According to Burns (2010: 2), "[action research] involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching context". The main idea is for teachers to systematically research their teaching practice which allows the teachers to view critically their work and make changes (Dana 2016: 19). Usually, when talking of action research, there is an area that could be improved and thus research is carried out to "develop new ideas and alternatives" (Burns 2010: 2). In its essence, action research is a "solution-oriented approach" (Cousin 2009: 149), which means searching for the answer through teacher's own practice and work.

Action research has a cyclic process that follows a structure that is in constant movement between the stages of "reconnaissance, planning, acting, observing, and reflecting" (Cousin 2009: 157). Dana (2016: 19) writes that the first step is stating a problem or an interesting question. After that, data is collected to understand the issue, and then the data is analyzed by reviewing different academic literature (ibid.: 20). When this part is finished, further steps are taken to test the theory in practice, and finally, the results are shared with others (ibid.). Burns (2010: 8) in their practice has followed the cyclical action

research model based on Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), which is believed to be one of the best-known models in action research. In Figure 1, the model's sequence can be seen, that of planning, acting, observing the effects of the action, and then reflecting the outcome, forming a revised plan, and beginning everything once again while moving in a constant spiral (Burns 2010: 8).

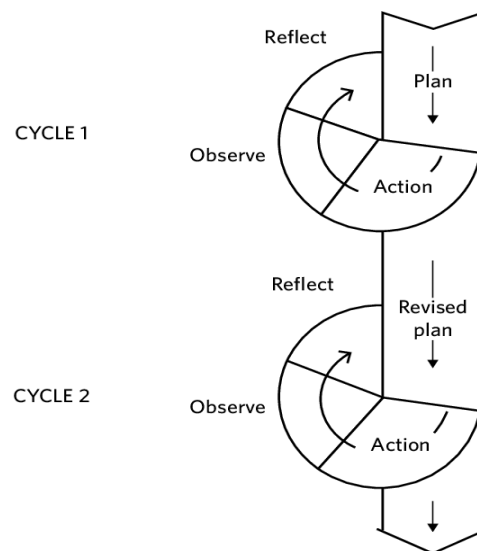


Figure 1. Kemmis and McTaggart model (1988, cited in Burns 2010: 9)

The stages of the action research usually remain the same but different authors define them in various ways, sometimes even reorganizing the steps. For example, Dana and Kemmis and McTaggart started with planning (Dana 2016: 20; Burns 2010: 9). Dana left acting to the end; for Kemmis and McTaggart, meanwhile, it was the second step (Dana 2016: 20; Burns 2010: 9). Another author's, O'Leary's, cycles start by observing and then continue with reflecting, planning, and acting (O'Leary, 2004 cited in Koshy 2010: 7). Even though action research models are often depicted moving in a spiral – like the one by Kemmis and McTaggart, Elliot has created their action research model using different boxes that are connected by arrows (Elliot, 1999 cited in Koshy 2010: 6). Since the model complements the study, each action researcher should find a suitable model for their research (Koshy 2010: 5). The research cycle in this thesis is similar to the one proposed by Kemmis

and McTaggart. It has been modified to suit the current study; this modified cycle is described in the next section.

2.1 The Study

The action research done in this thesis has two main cycles – cycle 1 and cycle 2. The limited number of cycles was determined by the number of lessons I had to give during my traineeship at a basic school in Tartu with seventh graders. The process of my action research can be seen in Figure 2. Preparation consists of all the work I did before cycle 1 and cycle 2. In cycle 1, I followed the process by conducting a pilot lesson. Cycle 2 is the most substantial, as it includes three mini-cycles of the speaking tasks, all of which required the same model of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

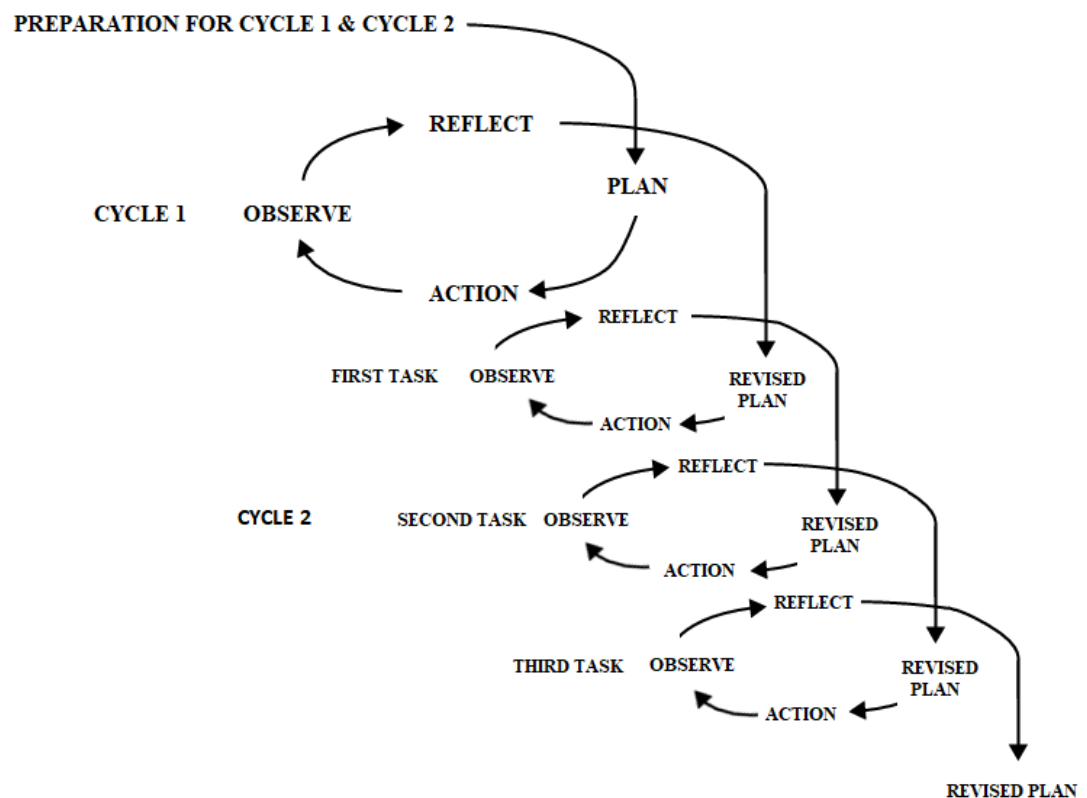


Figure 2. Action research model used in the study (Based on the model by Kemmis and McTaggart 1988.).

The current study was conducted in January 2021, during four lessons that took place between January 12th and January 20th in a basic school in Tartu during my teacher training practice. The study was done both via Zoom video conferencing software due to the national regulations from December 2020–January 2021 and in face-to-face classrooms. The first lesson on January 12th and the first task on January 13th were done on Zoom during distance learning. The second and third tasks were conducted in face-to-face classrooms, on January 19th and 20th accordingly. I chose Zoom for various reasons, most importantly because I had used it before and it has many useful options, such as forming breakout rooms, writing in the chat, the possibility to share a computer screen, and a whiteboard.

The participants were 21 seventh graders – 11 girls and 10 boys. All students were present in the second and third tasks. In the pilot task, a boy and a girl were absent and in the first task, a girl was absent. The students in the study are in my previous experience active, extremely good at self-management, curious, motivated, and willing to cooperate with me and their classmates. They want to achieve good results and work hard on the tasks given to them. When it comes to speaking, some students are more willing to do so than others, especially when I ask the whole class a question.

2.2 Data Collection

Data for this study was mainly collected by observing the students working on the speaking tasks and keeping a research journal about the results and observations made. A research journal is useful as it “can contain data which are obtained by participatory observation and by conversations and interviews in the field /.../ [and it] can contain written reflections on research methods and on [teacher’s] own role as researcher” (Altrichter et al. 2005: 12). There are different types of research journals, such as factual journals, descriptive journals, reflective journals, and memoir journals (Burns 2010: 90). I used a factual journal,

recording observations and viewing the outcomes from a different perspective. Moreover, I analyzed my activities as a teacher and my teaching practice could be improved. The data was collected right after the lesson. It was written down by answering pre-formed questions and sometimes even recorded.

In addition to the research journal, the participants answered an open-ended questionnaire after each speaking task in Google Forms (see Table 1).

Speaking task feedback
Please answer the questions as thoroughly as possible. The questions are about today's speaking task, where you had to tell a story based on the picture in groups.
Did you understand what the task was? Were the instructions clear?
What did you like about this task?
What didn't you like about this task?
What was most challenging in this task?
How did you feel when you had to speak in class?

Table 1. The feedback questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of five questions and was composed to get more general feedback from the students. Inspiration for the questionnaire came from an educational developer Jessica Gregg (2016) from the questions she posted for her students to answer after class. The questions in my questionnaire featured what students liked and disliked about the task, what was most challenging, and how they felt when they had to speak. The first question about understanding the teacher's instructions was added after the pilot task. This

change was made because for a task to be successful, students need to understand the teacher's instructions of the task (Meng 2009: 222). The students answered the questions in English. Before doing so, we discussed the questions thoroughly. The answers to the questionnaire along with the in-depth analysis of the research journal will be discussed further in the thesis.

2.3 Preparation

The first step towards conducting the study was to address the ethical issues. As the study featured underaged students, I had to ask for permission for the study from the school principal, my mentor at the same trainee school, and the parents of the students. My mentor and I had an oral agreement. I sent an email to the school's principal on December 15, 2020, who gave their permission to do the study. After that, I compiled a letter asking permission from the parents, and my mentor sent it to all the parents. In the letter, there was a clause at the end stating that if the parents did not wish their child to take part in the study, they should reply to the letter. The letter was sent to the parents on December 17, 2020, and the study started on January 12, 2021. No parent answered the letter stating they did not want their child to take part in the study.

The next step entailed gathering ideas for tasks. When starting to plan speaking tasks, the aim was to create tasks that would correlate with the topic learned and at the same time be interesting to students, possibly even representing real-life discussions in some ways. As is known, classroom tasks that are engaging are a solution to keep students actively participating (Ahlquist 2019: 388). Within those tasks, a decision was made to move from easier tasks to more complicated ones (Meng 2009: 222). I planned the tasks so that they would be integrated into the lessons, usually starting with a warm-up which helps students "familiarize /.../ [themselves] with the task topic" (Chen 2017: 332). I planned to take an observer role and to assist the students when they needed help. The aim was for the students

to work together in pairs or groups. This would allow all students to use English during the lesson. During the tasks, students would practice speaking English using new vocabulary along with already learned material.

The inspiration for the tasks was gathered from two different sources. Firstly, I focused on the tasks themselves, especially the tasks that are used in testing the speaking skill. For that, I used Sari Luoma's *Assessing Speaking* (2004) where a clear and systematic view of different speaking tasks is presented. In my study I am using four specially designed speaking tasks, all of which belong to different categories: comparing–contrasting, narration/storytelling, giving instructions, and expressing opinion/justification. Secondly, when thinking of the topics for the speaking tasks, I used *Prime-Time 2* student book (Evans & Dooley 2012). This is the same book students use with their regular teacher in their lessons which makes it a good basis to create new tasks. During my traineeship, I worked with the topic of Great People & Legends (Evans & Dooley 2012: 43–56), more specifically Historical Figures and the past simple tense. The grammar topic of past simple became the center-point in all tasks to see whether students use it as well in their speech as they do on paper.

The final act in preparation was creating the environment for the first cycle. Since the school I was doing the study used Google Meet, I first tried to form breakout rooms there. Because this feature is only in the paid version, I tried to create as many Google Meet links as possible and share them with the students. However, this made my computer too slow to process the operation. Therefore, instead of using Google Meet for the speaking task, I decided to create a Zoom class link, which I would share during the lesson in Google Meet. Once I have all the students on Zoom, it is easy to send them to work in breakout rooms.

After all the preparations were made, it was time to start cycle 1 of my action research.

2.4 Cycle 1: The Pilot Task

The first cycle consists of the pilot speaking task. This was done to test whether the planning for the speaking tasks works and what should be changed before the first speaking task. For the pilot speaking task in the first synchronous online class, I chose the comparing–contrasting task because this type is often used during assessments (Luoma 2004: 148). Instead of comparing–contrasting pictures, students compared statements about their winter break (see Table 2). Talking about themselves and their holiday made the topic more relatable for the students. The full task description can be seen in Appendix 1.

Mark <u>T</u> for true and <u>F</u> for false sentences.	Me	Partner
I spent my Christmas with my family.		
I went ice skating and/or skiing.		
I watched many different movies during my holiday.		
I ate blood sausages.		
I saw fireworks during New Year’s Eve.		
I played computer games.		
I didn’t worry about school.		
I had an awesome holiday.		
During my holiday I did something for the first time.		
I met Santa Claus.		
I got presents because I was a good child last year.		
I built a snowman.		
I stayed up all night on the 31 st of December.		
I made a New Year’s resolution.		
I was happy and relaxed during my winter holiday.		

Table 2. Pilot task worksheet.

The first lesson took place on January 12, 2021, in Google Meet. The speaking task together with the pre-speaking task, which involved answering to the statements

individually, took 30 minutes instead of the planned 20 minutes. For the speaking task we moved to Zoom, and I waited in Google Meet until I saw that everyone had muted their microphones and turned off their cameras and were present on Zoom. I explained the task orally on Zoom without showing anything on the screen. I explained that they will be working together in random pairs and in one group of three. In the breakout rooms, 17 students out of 19 were present which meant that two students could not participate because of switching the platforms.

I constantly encouraged the students to use their microphones and turn on their cameras. However, only six students kept their cameras on for the whole lesson. Students were not keen on using the microphone in the main room. In the breakout rooms, students spoke much more freely. There were only three pairs/groups out of eight who had no issues. In other rooms, people were experiencing different technical issues – either the internet connection was bad or there were problems with the microphones. I found it very difficult to assist the students with different technical issues, as it required serious multitasking between the students, technology, and the lesson. The constant multitasking made me more absent-minded, and I forgot to tell students how much time they had in the breakout rooms to complete the tasks.

Additionally, moving between Google Meet and Zoom took more time than I had originally planned. This led me to change the original post-task activity where students talk about the similarities and differences in their statements. Instead, we completed the feedback questionnaire right away. Giving feedback after the task is better since the memory is fresher than some lessons later. Therefore, I decided to have the students answer the questionnaire after each speaking task. Furthermore, giving concise instructions helps reduce anxiety among students. Since it is not always easy to observe whether the students have understood

the task, I decided to change the number of four questions to five and ask about the clarity of my instructions after conducting the pilot study.

Based on the pilot task, I decided to complement the questionnaire, give students a fixed time to be in the breakout room, and plan more time for the speaking task. These changes were implemented to improve the second cycle of my action research.

2.5 Cycle 2: Speaking Tasks

Cycle 2 is the summary of three speaking tasks that I conducted as a part of this cycle. After having considered the revised plan of the first cycle, I prepared for doing three speaking tasks. The first task (hereafter T1) was done on Zoom just like the pilot task and the other two tasks were in a face-to-face classroom. T1 was a storytelling task (see Appendices 2 & 3), where students needed to create a story based on the pictures given to them in groups. The second task (hereafter T2) was a split information task (see Appendices 4, 5 & 6), where students had to work in pairs to give directions to fill in the missing information on their page. The third task (hereafter T3) was a discussion task (see Appendix 7) where students had to work in groups, searching and discussing information about courses. Those tasks were chosen with the goal of moving from easier tasks to more complicated ones. For each task I followed the same pattern as seen in Figure 2 – planning the task, acting it out, observing the action, reflecting on the findings, and then making changes to start with a newly revised plan.

The positive aspects of the speaking tasks were that students were always motivated, focused, and ready to do the tasks even though it was difficult in two environments. In T1, I experienced technical issues which caused problems for students as I had to focus on fixing the issues which led me to be more absent-minded. I forgot to tell the students how long they had to do the storytelling task for and sent them to work in the breakout rooms straightaway.

Moreover, because of the issues, I did not notice that one student could not get into Zoom and therefore was unable to take part in the speaking task. Finally, the whole task took about 40 minutes which was more than I had originally planned. It is difficult to work on multiple fronts at the same time while remaining focused and task-oriented. In both face-to-face classrooms, I gave the students clear instructions on how much time they had to complete the task. In T3, I assigned the role of the time-keeper to one specific student in each group.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face masks were worn in class, and I had to repeat myself multiple times to make sure that everyone understood me correctly. The only issue is that it is difficult to understand when students speak because they tend to speak quietly and when almost half of the class is talking at the same time, like in T2, it is challenging to understand them without leaning in and listening carefully. The same issue occurred when students were presenting their findings on curses to the whole class in T3. I did not specify that they needed to turn towards the audience and speak out as loud as possible. When someone is speaking in a synchronous online classroom when they are not supposed to, they can be muted. In class, however, when dealing with other students disrupting the speakers, it shifts the focus away from the speaker. Despite the fact it was quieter in the online classroom, I got a better overview of what was happening in a face-to-face classroom. I saw the body language and reactions of the students immediately and I was more present and able to help them when they needed me to.

I changed how instructions were given with each task. I did it because it seemed in T1 that my oral instructions were not enough, and students needed to see them in the written form too. So, in T2, I prepared the written instructions for myself and showed the instructions on the screen while I explained them orally but did not show them during the task. In T3, I explained the instructions orally and they were on screen during the whole task. Task design became more specific with each task. In T1, I should have given more instructions to students

on how to tell a story based on the pictures. For example, a list of questions or a minimum number of sentences to form would have helped them. Even though some students told an interesting and detailed story, some students only did the bare minimum. However, in T3, I maximized the time they had to do the task by letting each groupmate take an extra role, either to watch time, take notes, or present their ideas to the class because “if each learner has a role to play, then each learner knows what to do in the activity, and others expect them to play their role” (Nation 1989: 24). That additionally teaches students about efficient group work and excludes the option that some groups will finish too early.

The main aim of the tasks was for the students to practice speaking English. In pairs and groups, students were more likely to speak than in front of the whole class. In the first and third tasks, I specifically mentioned that they need to present their ideas to the whole class. However, in T2, I did not state that after the task I might ask someone to give instructions. When the pair work finished, I asked whether anyone was willing to give instructions, there was no one, and since I did not state it at the beginning, I did not urge anyone to speak. Whenever I moved around the breakout rooms or in class, I heard that students mostly used English, especially in the first and second tasks. T3 had the most flexibility with the language use since students had to search for information on the internet and put together a text, which is why in T3 I heard the Estonian language the most. I feel it would have been possible to encourage students to use the target language more in T3 than I did. With speaking tasks, especially when asking someone to speak in front of the whole class before preparing, students might become anxious. Therefore, when conducting speaking tasks students must be informed exactly how and what is going to happen.

For students, it is important that they can choose their pairs/groups. However, in a synchronous online lesson, it is faster to do the choosing for them. Zoom allows creating random groups and pairs very quickly, which is what I used in T1. This is useful because

then students can practice speaking with classmates they might not otherwise work together with. Besides, organizing pairs/groups provides a different learning opportunity for the students (Chen 2017: 336). In face-to-face classrooms, I wanted to see how they would do when they got to choose their pairs. Students were very excited about it. In T3, I gave students a choice whether we will form random groups, or they would choose, and students decided to form the groups themselves.

Based on my observations and notes I can say that with each task I improved different aspects of the speaking tasks. These aspects were mostly giving instructions, focusing on the time limit, and forming pairs/groups. These are my remarks; however, students have their point of view which is why I asked them to fill in the feedback questionnaire after each speaking task. In the next chapter, I will focus on the results of the feedback questionnaires.

3. THE ANALYSIS OF THE FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRES

After each speaking task, I had the students answer a list of questions in Google Forms, the questions were given in Table 1 above. The questionnaire could be accessed by a shortened link using *bit.do* or a QR-code. In face-to-face classes, students used their phones, and in synchronous online classes the computer to answer the questionnaire. The questions were general and open-ended which allowed the students to comment on the things they wished.

Based on the answers, I conducted a content analysis in Excel. I assigned different themes for all answers, counted the occurrences, and arranged them into six main categories. The categories are: 1) topic of the task; 2) unclear instructions; 3) speaking in English; 4) working in pairs/groups either chosen randomly by me or in pairs/groups they made themselves; 5) environment either on Zoom or in a face-to-face classroom, and 6) technical issues. Since the first and fifth questions were yes-no questions, these categories were used in the second, third, and fourth questions as students offered more extensive answers there.

In this chapter, I provide the analysis of the students' answers. I will observe the results of cycle 1 and cycle 2 and analyze the findings in the context of the previous studies and my journal article observations.

3.1 The Results of Cycle 1

The pilot questionnaire was used to show whether the questions provide helpful feedback from the students. In the cycle 1 questionnaire, 20 students participated. They were asked to answer four questions based on their synchronous online lesson speaking task: what they liked and did not like about the task, what they found challenging, and how they felt

while speaking. The results of the three first questions are given in Table 3. From those three questions, eight categories emerged.

The category ‘everything OK’ consists of answers where students responded that everything was alright. In the second question about dislikes, nine students reported having nothing to dislike and in the third question, two students mentioned that nothing was challenging. Eight students liked talking about their holiday and there were no students who did not like this topic. One student found it challenging because they had forgotten about their activities during the holidays. Moreover, four students found speaking in English challenging, because they usually use Estonian in the tasks together with English.

Table 3. The feedback questionnaire answers in questions 1-3 in the pilot task.

Categories	Likes	Dislikes	Challenges
Everything OK	0	9	2
Topic of the task	8	0	1
Speaking in English	0	0	4
Working in pairs/groups	6	0	0
Random pairs/groups	1	3	1
Environment	0	1	1
Technical issues	0	2	5
No answer	6	4	6

Under the category of ‘working in pairs/groups’, the replies were positive as six students said they liked working together in pairs/groups. However, only one student mentioned liking working in random pairs/groups. Three students disliked random pairs because it was nerve-racking to wait in Zoom to see who they will be paired up with. One of the students mentioned there being “awkward silence” while working with a random partner. For one student, it was challenging to work in a random pair because their partner was not very cooperative.

The environment used for the pilot task was Zoom and one student reported not liking Zoom since they are not familiar with it. Another had problems with the constant switching between Google Meet and Zoom as it caused technical issues. The main technical issues were microphones not working or bad internet connection, which were anticipated before the study. Other dislikes and challenges under ‘technical issues’ were not specified. Under the category of ‘no answer’, students either wrote they could not participate or did not answer the question. In the pilot task, six students in the first and third question and four students in the second question did not give any answers to the questions.

In Figure 3, we see the students’ answers to the fourth question in the pilot task. Six students replied feeling good. One student mentioned feeling “brave [since] almost nobody else dared to turn on their microphone”. Five students’ answers I categorized under ‘everything OK’ – they either felt “normal” because they are used to speaking in class, or they did not see anything special in it.

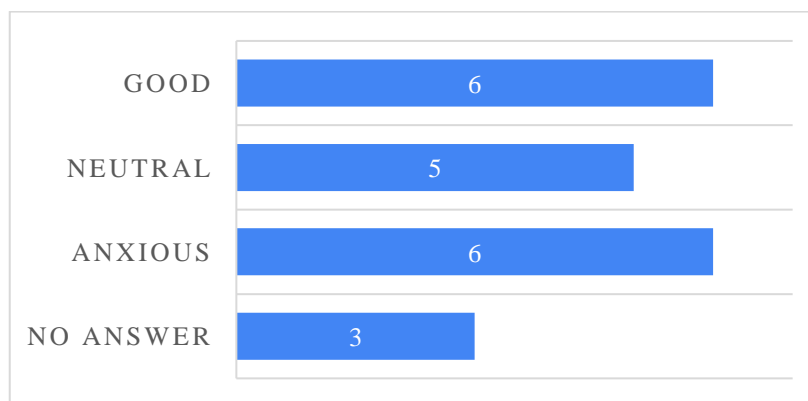


Figure 3. How did you feel when you had to speak in class?

Six students reported feeling anxious, which was caused by not knowing who they will be paired up with. However, students said they became calmer when they started speaking. Three students' answers were categorized under ‘no answer’.

The results of Cycle 1 were mainly a starting point for Cycle 2. These questions were tested to see if they would give relevant answers and they did. The eight categories that emerged give a good overview of the main topics the students had in mind. Based on these results, I can say that students liked the topic of the task and working in pairs even though there were technical issues caused by the environment. Although six students felt anxious, 11 students reported feeling either 'good' or 'neutral'. In the next section, I am going to use the same categories while analyzing the answers in each task separately.

3.2 The Results of Cycle 2

The questionnaires for the first and third task received 19 responses and 20 responses for T2 questionnaire. The first question was added to the questionnaire after the pilot task (cf. Table 1). This was done for the reason that providing detailed instructions on the task helps students to get better results (Meng 2009: 222). It helps students feel more secure in the process when they know what is expected of them (Harmer 2015: 386).

In Figure 4, the results for the first question in all three tasks in cycle 2 can be seen. In T1, I gave the instructions orally which seemed to be sufficient as 16 students reported having understood the task. In T2, I used PowerPoint slides to accompany my oral explanation and the same number of the students mentioned the instructions were clear. In T3, all students said they understood the task clearly. Instead of showing the slides during my explanation, I kept them on the screen during the whole task.

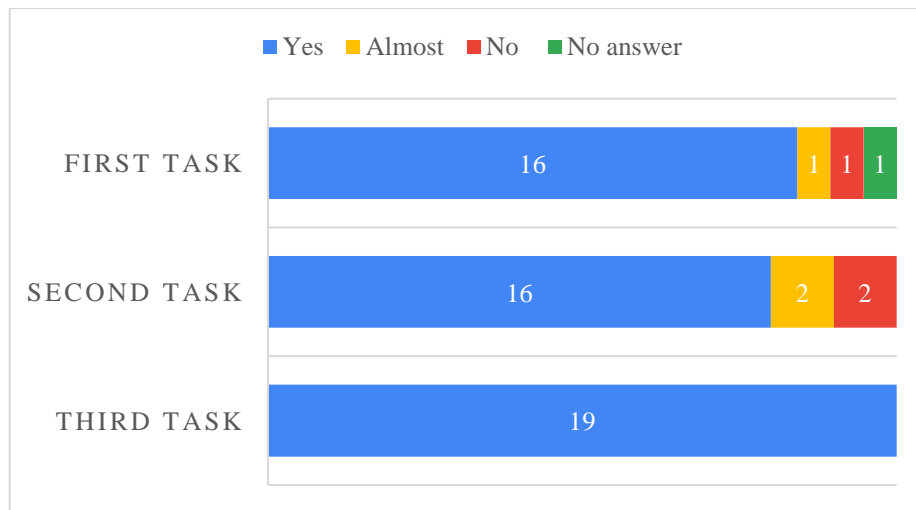


Figure 4. Did you understand what the task was? Were the instructions clear?

A student in T1 and two students in T2 reported having *almost* understood the task. A student in T1 guessed what they had to do once they got into the breakout room. In T2, one student mentioned that the task was unclear at first but more logical after thinking about it. In T1, a student mentioned that the task was not clear because they joined the meeting later. In T2, two students stated they did not understand the task. In T1, one student was unable to participate due to technical issues. Therefore, if the task is easier, then it is fine to give only an oral explanation like in T1. However, when the task is long and consists of different parts as applicable to T2 and T3, it is best to keep written instructions open on the screen or the table in front of the students. This helps save time because students then do not need to use it to figure out what they must do; rather, they can start doing it.

In the second question, students answered what they liked about the task (cf. Table 4). The results do not correspond with the sample size because some students' answers could be divided into more than one category. 14 students reported liking the topic of the task in T1, 13 students did so in T2, and 12 students in T3, respectively. In T1, students wrote they liked the freedom to put together their own story. In T2, students mentioned that the task was interesting and fun. In T3, students liked searching for and talking about the curses. For

all three tasks, students mentioned the tasks were new and “different from the tasks [they] had done so far”. Having a good, relatable, challenging, and sometimes even personalized topic helps to keep students motivated. The students’ results in cycle 1 and cycle 2 show that the tasks I created were appropriate and captivating for the students. Moreover, three students wrote after T3 that they liked speaking in English and expressing their opinions. As no other student reported it in the first two tasks, this shows that students slowly became more confident in expressing themselves in the target language during cycle 2.

Table 4. What did you like about this task?

Categories	First task	Second task	Third task
Topic of the task	14	13	12
Speaking in English	0	0	3
Working in pairs/groups	4	6	4
Working with a chosen pair/group	0	5	3
Random pairs/groups	1	0	0
No answer	2	1	0
TOTAL	21	25	22

Long and Porter (1985) and Talandis Jr and Stout (2015) have both suggested the positive aspects of group work for keeping students encouraged and motivated, and it is also seen in the results in Table 4. In each task, some students reported liking working in pairs and groups – four students in T1, six students in T2, and four students in T3. In T1, students were assigned random groupmates and only one student reported liking it. In T2 and T3, students got to choose their partners, and five in T2 along with three students in T3 liked it. Based on the students’ answers, it can be said that students mostly prefer working in pairs/groups they choose themselves. This matches the findings by Chen (2017: 339) and Meng (2009: 223) who stated that students prefer to work in groups they choose. Meng (2009: 223) also said that using different roles in group work will make the collaboration

more efficient. In T3, one student mentioned they liked that they had roles during group work. Two students' answers in T1 and one student's answer in T2 were categorized under 'no answer'.

In the third question, students talked about what they did not like about the task (cf. Table 5). The answers correspond to the sample size. Similarly to the categories in the pilot task, under 'everything OK' are the responses of the students who did not have any issues or anything they did not like, or who claimed to like everything. Under 'topic of the task', two students in T1 reported not liking the task as they did not learn much. In T2, six students mentioned they did not like the task because there was too little time to do it and giving instructions to the partner was difficult. This was a task where I could have given students more time than the eight minutes they had. One student in T2 said that the instructions I gave were unclear which made it difficult to understand the task. In T3, one student found the task to be too easy, and another did not like searching for information online.

Table 5. What didn't you like about this task?

Categories	First task	Second task	Third task
Everything OK	8	10	12
Topic of the task	2	6	2
Unclear instructions	0	1	0
Speaking in English	0	1	3
Random pairs/groups	4	0	0
Environment	3	1	0
No answer	2	1	2
TOTAL	19	20	21

In T3, three students noted that they liked speaking in English (cf. Table 4) and three students said that they did not like speaking in English in class (cf. Table 5). Although no students talked about speaking in English in T1 and T2 in the second question (cf. Table 4), one student in T2 wrote they did not like speaking altogether (cf. Table 5). Even if speaking

is encouraged from different perspectives, it is understandable that not all students might find it comfortable right away.

In T1, one student liked being in random groups (cf. Table 4); however, four students reported they did not like being in random groups (cf. Table 5) and mentioned that they should be allowed to choose their partners themselves. However, in a synchronous online lesson, it is easier to put students randomly together. It is even positive for the students to work together with classmates they would not choose to help practice the language with as many students as possible. Nevertheless, it is good to give choices to students which is why in T2 and T3 they got to work together with the people they wanted to. Three students in T1 did not like the environment they were working in, which was expected since it was an online environment. The students had issues with commuting between two web-conferencing apps, Zoom and Google Meet. In T2, a student expressed their dislike towards the noise in the classroom environment which made it difficult to do the task. The noise was so loud because during the pair task in T2, almost half the class was speaking at the same time. Two students in T1 and T3 and one student in T2 did not answer the third question.

The fourth question in the feedback questionnaire was about the challenges in the task (cf. Table 6). Three students' answers in T1 and T2 and six students' answers in T3 were categorized under 'everything OK'. The thing that most students found challenging in all three tasks was the topic. Five students in T1, nine students in T2, and eight students in T3 mentioned this. In T1, students could not understand the picture and it was difficult to create a story based on it. In T2, it was challenging for the students to describe moving on the map. In T3, the most challenging part was searching for the curses online. Despite that, I would still say that when the topic is challenging, students can rely on their partner and group. Lev Vygotsky's ideas of "zone of proximal development" can be used here, where problem-solving is better "in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978: 86).

Also, students found it challenging to speak in English, especially in front of the class as a student stated in both T2 and T3.

Table 6. What was most challenging in this task?

Categories	First task	Second task	Third task
Everything OK	3	3	6
Topic of the task	5	9	8
Speaking in English	3	5	4
Working in pairs/groups	0	0	1
Random pairs/groups	4	0	0
Environment	0	3	0
Technical issues	1	0	0
No answer	3	0	0
TOTAL	19	20	19

For one student, it was challenging to work in a group they chose because there were too many different opinions expressed in the group. Otherwise, students had mostly issues with working in a random pair in T1. It was either challenging to speak to a random partner or getting them to speak at all. Just like in the third question (cf. Table 5), some students mentioned the noise in T2. Another problem that students found challenging was wearing the face mask as it complicated the communication. It was already difficult to hear the partner speak and even more so when wearing a face mask. In this aspect, it is better to work in an online setting as it is much quieter in a breakout room. Although some students mainly had technical issues mentioned in the previous question, one student found the technical issues to be challenging due to the internet connection. Three students in T1 did not give any answers.

In the fifth question, students answered how they felt when speaking in class (cf. Figure 5). Six students in T1, 14 students in T2, and eight students in T3 reported feeling good. One student in T1 said they “felt secure”. In T2, students said they felt confident, and the process was natural. In T2 I did not pressure the students to speak in front of the whole class in a post-task activity, which is perhaps why the response ‘good’ is very frequent. I had

the students decide whether they wish to do the paired task in front of the class, and everyone refused. Since it is important to have a study environment where students feel safe and happy, it is not always useful to pressure them, and it is also the reason why I did not demand it. In T3, students often said they felt great when speaking.



Figure 5. How did you feel when you had to speak in class?

Six students in T1, two students in T2, and four students in T3 felt neutral. They did not express feeling good nor anxious but rather normal and alright. In T1, seven students mentioned feeling anxious. In T2, only one student reported feeling “anxious and uncomfortable”. In T3, five students felt anxious. It is more than likely that these were the students who had to read their group findings to the whole class. One of them said they were anxious because they did not have much to talk about courses. Another said that speaking in person is more difficult than online. ‘No answer’ was given by three students in T2 and two students in T3.

Practicing the target language is very important – it helps improve not only the language skills but the communication competence also (Council of Europe 2020: 32). It is better to work in pairs and groups where each student will get the chance to practice the language. Otherwise, it might happen that the students will only listen to the teacher talk

(Bailey 2003: 55). Working in pairs and groups allows students to speak in smaller groups which is not as stressful as in front of the whole class. Students will learn the language more effectively (Krashen 1982: 31), and students like working together, especially when they get to choose their partners (see Table 4)(Chen 2017: 339; Meng 2009: 223). When students enjoy what they do and feel comfortable, it increases their willingness to communicate altogether (MacIntyre et al. 1998: 546). The teacher can improve the WTC of the students by encouraging them, providing them with concise instructions, and being mindful when correcting the students (Zhang & Head 2010: 2). Moreover, speaking in pairs and groups is learner-centered and part of active learning, which is important in today's education (National curriculum 2011, Appendix 2: 5). Although synchronous online lessons try to mimic the traditional face-to-face classes and they are more time-saving (Gherheş et al. 2021: 12), students in the study I conducted seemed to prefer the face-to-face classroom (see Tables 3 & 5). In synchronous online lessons, both in the pilot task and in T1, some students experienced technical issues, which complicated their learning in the lesson.

The students' answers in the feedback questionnaires gave more insight about the tasks in terms of what is planned versus what happens. The results of the students' answers and the ideas I wrote in my research journal correspond with each other and the findings from previous authors in case of the aspects that are helpful when conducting speaking tasks and the issues that occur.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to do speaking tasks in pairs and groups in both face-to-face and via video conferencing software Zoom in English as a foreign language classroom. The topic was chosen because the speaking skill requires the ability not only to know the language structure but to be able to use it orally as well (National curriculum 2011, Appendix 2: 2). Practicing speaking needs more attention because in our Estonian speaking environment there is not much opportunity to practice it among peers. The basis for creating the speaking tasks was taken from the Evans & Dooley student book *Prime Time 2* (2012), and the task design was based on Sari Luoma's *Assessing Speaking* (2004).

The effect and design of different speaking tasks were studied using action research. This method provides the possibility to analyze a problem, implement changes, and systematically test the effect of these changes in practice while reflecting on the outcomes. Furthermore, according to the Occupational Qualification Standards for teachers (2020: B.2.4.), conducting action research in class to improve their teaching is mandatory. The action research, which consisted of preparation and two cycles, was conducted among seventh graders in a basic school in Tartu during four lessons. The research started with 1) preparation, that was done before the cycles and contained the arrangements done for the study; which was followed by 2) cycle 1, which was the pilot task; and 3) cycle 2, which consisted of three speaking tasks. Moreover, to get a student perspective on the tasks, students were asked to answer open-ended questions in a feedback questionnaire after each task to see how they felt about the tasks, what they found challenging, and to get an idea of their overall emotions about speaking in class.

This thesis had three research questions. The first question of the thesis was: How to encourage students to speak in a target language in class? I discovered that speaking skills must be concentrated on in each class to provide students the learning opportunity. That

means that the tasks must be integrated into the lesson systematically. The tasks must be captivating and something that students might even find new. They should not be overly complicated but enough so to keep the students interested. Furthermore, the instructions for the task must be clear. Students work better when they know what exactly is expected of them. After giving the instructions orally, it is advisable to keep them in a visible location during the whole task. When the instructions are understandable and the task is captivating, students will experience less stress. Additionally, having a stress-free environment in class where students are encouraged to speak helps the teacher to conduct the speaking tasks.

The second research question of the thesis was: How does speaking in pairs/groups affect practicing the speaking skill? Since students feel most anxious about speaking in front of the whole class, they should work together in pairs or groups. Working together in smaller groups helps more students simultaneously practice the target language as well. In addition, in pairs/groups, students help each other with the given task, and they get to practice different grammatical constructions. Also, students feel more comfortable when they can first work together with classmates and then discuss it in front of the whole class. Besides, pair and group work are a part of the active learning method, which is learner-centered and used in schools around Estonia (National curriculum 2011, Appendix 2: 9). When sometimes it is a good idea to create groups randomly, students are happier when they get to choose their partner. The results of my study also support this statement: students love working together, especially in pairs/groups that they have chosen. Therefore, it is good to start with a pair/group task to allow students to prepare for speaking in front of the whole class.

The third research question of this thesis was: Which problems occur while conducting speaking tasks in a face-to-face classroom or online environment? Teachers must keep in mind the environment they work in and the problems they encounter. Although most speaking tasks work in both a face-to-face and online classroom environment, it is necessary

to think of the problems that might occur in both environments. In a synchronous online learning, technical issues that will complicate doing the task are frequent. Issues such as bad internet connection or microphone not working take up valuable time from the lesson, whether it is the teacher or the students who experience the issues. It is especially complicated for teachers as they need to multitask on fixing the problems and continuing with the lesson. This might cause the teacher to forget to give some instructions to the class. It is useful for the teacher to take notes about the instructions they have to give to the students during online learning. This will help prevent the situation that something important goes unmentioned, like how long students must work for in the breakout room. When leaving the technical issues aside, synchronous online learning provides the teacher with an environment where students can quietly express their thoughts in pairs. This is a challenge in a face-to-face classroom since with almost half of the class speaking at the same time, it can be difficult to hear your partner. Furthermore, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, some students who are at least 12 years old wear face masks in class which further complicates understanding the partner in a noisy classroom. One option would be to ask all students to speak a little quieter.

This thesis helped me to comprehend conducting speaking tasks in both face-to-face and online classrooms. Moreover, doing action research benefits my future teaching practice. For example, I now know what to pay attention to when doing speaking tasks. In addition, I know the overall process of action research which makes it easier to use it in my classroom practice in other aspects of teaching. The most significant take-away message of this thesis is allowing students to feel comfortable in the environment where they speak in the target language as this is the first step in becoming proficient in the English language. Since my action research consisted of four lessons during my traineeship, it would be good to do action research for a longer period. For further research, it would be beneficial to test students

speaking skills individually in a pre-test and post-test before and after the research to see a better development in the students' language. The study could be carried out in two groups where one group is a control group and the other the test group. In the test group, changes are made in each cycle as in this action research. As I focused on using the past simple in this action research, the future study could also be about using past tenses. The outcome should show whether there is a difference between the control group or the test groups in their language development using the past tenses.

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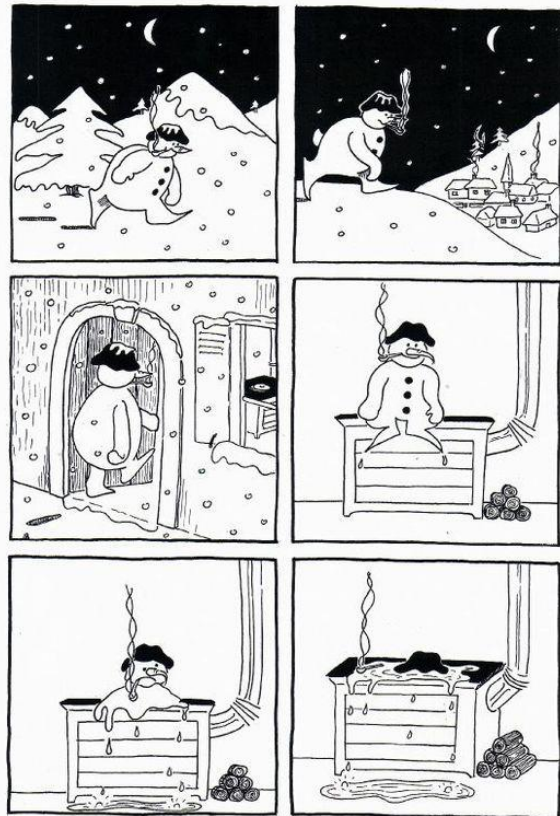
Appendix 1: The Pilot Task Design

The Pilot Task	
Level	A2.2 – B1.1
Time	20 minutes
The topic of the task	Comparing and contrasting
Aims	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students use the target language while working together. 2. Students use past simple while speaking. 3. Students compare and contrast their statements. 4. Students talk about their similarities and differences.
Preparation	<i>Students:</i> Individually, under the <i>me</i> column in the table, mark T for true and F for false sentences about yourself.
Task description	<p>In pairs, compare each other's answers and find similarities and differences.</p> <p>For example,</p> <p>Student A. <i>I watched many different movies during my holiday.</i></p> <p>Student B. <i>I did too./ Me too./ I also watched a lot of movies.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>Sadly, I didn't. Well, actually I didn't. I played board games.</i></p> <p>After that, you will share some information about your similarities and differences.</p> <p>For example,</p> <p><i>We both watched movies.</i></p> <p><i>I, like my friend watched movies.</i></p> <p><i>I watched movies, but my friend played board games.</i></p> <p><i>While I watched movies, my friend didn't.</i></p>
Extra	True and False statements are seen in Table 2.

Appendix 2: The First Task (T1) Design

Level	A2.2 – B1.1
Time	15 minutes
The topic of the task	Storytelling
Aims	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students use the target language while working together. 2. Students use past simple while speaking. 3. Students create a story based on the pictures. 4. Students present their stories to the class.
Preparation	<i>Teacher:</i> Creating links for the students to describe the pictures and distributing students randomly into groups of three.
Task description	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Look at the picture and try to tell a story, what is shown on the picture. Use Past Simple! If you have any vocabulary questions, let me know or check the online dictionary. Be as creative as possible, you can give names to the people or locations. If you want, you can take notes. 2. When five minutes is over, each group will present their story. You can choose one person who talks, or you can all take turns and talk. You must use past simple! 3. Class feedback. Check using past simple, overall creativity, and how talkative they are.
Extra	The pictures used in this task are in Appendix 3.

Appendix 3: T1 Pictures



Appendix 4: The Second Task (T2) Design

Level	A2.2 – B1.1
Time	8–10 minutes
The topic of the task	Giving instructions. Split information.
Aims	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students use the target language. 2. Students use past simple. 3. Students give each other the missing information. 4. Students give concise and understandable instructions.
Preparation	<i>Students:</i> Revise useful vocabulary on the screen (Appendix 6) for the speaking task and choose your partner.
Task description	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You will be giving and receiving instructions on a map. To make this task a little bit more interesting you have a story. Da Vinci himself visited the 21st century and he wanted to see everyday life. You are going to tell your partner how he got from point A to point B and what places he visited. 2. One of you will get one map with some locations and instructions and another will get the same map with instructions but with different locations. DO NOT SHOW THE MAP TO EACH OTHER! On the map, you have two tasks. 3. In the task where you have numbers, you will have to look at your map and explain to your partner, how to get from point A to point B. 4. In the task where there is a short text you have to listen to your partner and mark the names of the buildings in the correct places on the map. 5. When both of you have finished explaining, you can show each other your maps to see, if what you wrote on your map matches what is written on your partner's map.
Extra	In Appendix 5, there are the worksheets used in this task (<i>edited</i>). In Appendix 6, there is the vocabulary list used.

Appendix 5: T2 Worksheets

STUDENT A

Task 1.

Two weeks ago, Leonardo da Vinci arrived in the 21st century. He had only one day to spend here, and he decided to visit many interesting places. Listen to your partner's instructions and write down the correct names of the places da Vinci visited on the correct buildings.

Task 2.

Your partner just heard that two weeks ago da Vinci visited our century. Give them the exact instructions on how da Vinci went from:

1. the hospital to the art gallery.
2. the art gallery to the school.
3. the school to the Town Hall.



STUDENT B

Task 1.

Your partner just heard that two weeks ago da Vinci visited our century. Tell them the exact instructions on how da Vinci went from:

1. the police station to the museum.
2. the museum to the supermarket.
3. the supermarket to the cinema.

Task 2.

Two weeks ago, Leonardo da Vinci arrived in the 21st century. He had only one day to spend here, and he decided to visit many interesting places. Listen to your partner's instructions and write down the correct names of the places da Vinci visited on the correct buildings.



Appendix 6: T2 Vocabulary list

go right/left	mine paremale/vasakule
across the street	üle tänava
cross	ületama
go along the street	mine piki tänavat
It'll be on your left/right.	See on sinu vasakul/paremal pool.
go past sth	mine millestki mööda
go straight on	mine otse edasi
Take the first/second road on the left/right.	Mine esimesele/teisele teele vasakul/paremal.
turn right/left/around	pööra paremale/vasakule/ümber
crossroads/junction	ristmik

Appendix 7: The Third Task (T3) Design

Level	A2.2 – B1.1
Time	8–10 minutes
The topic of the task	Giving instructions. Split information.
Aims	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students use the target language. 2. Students use the internet to search for information. 3. Students work together to form a text. 4. Students work together, discuss the answers, and explain their choice. 5. Students feel free to give their opinion and do not feel stressed.
Preparation	<i>Students:</i> Do the B exercise 4A on page 47. Read about King Tutankhamun and write the correct form in the gap.
Task description	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You have three questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you bring any examples of curses that people believe other than Tutankhamun's? b. Why do you think people believe in curses? c. Do you believe in curses? Why/Why not? 2. For the first question you can also google for some answers. 3. After you have discussed these questions in groups, we will discuss them all together, so be ready to answer. 4. In each group, choose a person who watches time, takes notes, and speaks in front of the class.

RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Monika Mander

Speaking Tasks in Face-To-Face and Online EFL Classrooms – An Action Research Approach

Rääkimisülesanded auditoorsetes ja veebipõhistes inglise keel võõrkeelena klassiruumides – tegevusuuring

Magistritöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv: 53

Käesoleva magistritöö fookus on tegevusuuringul, mille käigus viidi läbi rääkimisülesanded inglise keele tundides nii auditoorses kui ka veebipõhises õppekeskkonnas. Tegevusuuring toimus seitsmenda klassi õpilastega ühes Tartu põhikoolis. Antud töö peamine eesmärk on leida viisid, kuidas julgustada õpilasi suhtlema sihtkeeles; näha, kuidas rääkimine paardes/gruppides mõjutab rääkimisoskuse harjutamist ning leida lahendusi probleemidele, mis võivad aset leida kas auditoorses või veebipõhises klassiruumis.

Magistritöö koosneb kuuest osast: sissejuhatausest, kirjandusülevaatest, empiirilisest osast, tagasisideküsitluste tulemuste analüüsist ja kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatauses on ülevaade uurimuse taustast ning rääkimisoskusest üldiselt. Kirjandusülevaade keskendub rääkimisoskusele, eelkõige „Euroopa keeleõppe raamdokumendi“ (2001) ning „Põhikooli riikliku õppekava“ (2011) kontekstis; auditoorsele ja veebipõhisele õppekeskkonnale; probleemidele, mis mõjutavad õpilasi sihtkeeles rääkimisel; paaris- ja grupitööle ning rääkimisülesannetele. Empiirilise osa keskmes on tegevusuuring, uurimus ja uurimispäeviku analüüs. Tagasisideküsitluste tulemuste analüüsi osas on välja toodud õpilaste vastused ning võrreldud neid uurimispäeviku ja eelnevate uurimuste leidudega.

Õpilaste julgustamiseks on hea kasutada paaris- ja grupitöid, kus õpilased suhtlevad enne omavahel ning hiljem klassi ees. Lisaks tuleb kasutada ülesandeid, mis on motiveerivad ja kaasahaaravad ning tööjuhised peavad olema võimalikult täpsed, soovitatavalt õpilaste silme ees terve ülesande vältel. Veebipõhises õppekeskkonnas tuleb arvestada tehnoloogiliste probleemidega nagu halb internetiühendus või lisatarvikute, nagu mikrofone, mitte töötamine. Lisaks on probleemiks ka õpilaste soovimatus mitte lülitada sisse veebikaamerat, mistõttu on kontakti saavutamine nendega raskendatud. Auditoorses klassiruumis on sageli probleemiks sageli lärm, mis tekib paaris- või grupitöö ajal. Lisaks muudavad suhtluse mõistmise keerukamaks praeguse COVID-19 pandeemia tõttu kantavad näomaskid.

Märksõnad: inglise keel, rääkimisoskus, paaris- ja grupitöö, auditoorme õppekeskkond, veebipõhine õppekeskkond.

Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks

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