UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

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DEVELOPING YEAR 10 STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE WITH A TASK-BASED EFL SPEAKING COURSE

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The thesis investigates teaching oral English in 10th grade in an Estonian state gymnasium with a task-based speaking course and evaluating students' perceived willingness to communicate and competence in speaking. The research aims to find out what effect will a task-based EFL speaking course have on students' willingness to communicate and their perceived competence in speaking English.

The speaking course had 30 contact lessons of 45 minutes. During the action research, 21 mostly open-ended speaking tasks and a number of additional activities, five getting-to-know and 10 warm-up activities for starting the lessons, suitable for year 10 students, were compiled and tried out with two groups of EFL learners of 10th grade, 33 students in total, in January and February 2024. Teacher notes from the implementation stage are added to the description of tasks, in Appendix 1. After the course, a questionnaire was filled out by the students about their willingness to communicate in English before and after the course, as well as their perceived competence in speaking English, and feedback was asked to the tasks and the course in general. The last part of the action research is a reflection of the findings and discussion on the future, as all of the students who participated, think that open-ended speaking tasks in a cooperative environment should be a natural part of English lessons at the gymnasium level.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT....2

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS....4

INTRODUCTION....5

1 LITERATURE REVIEW....9

1.1 The Estonian Context of Teaching English....9

1.2 Willingness to Communicate....12

1.3 Oral Skills and Modern Pedagogy....15

1.4 Task-Based Language Teaching....18

1.4.1 Open-Ended Speaking Tasks....21

2 ACTION RESEARCH....23

2.1 The Context of Teaching English at Viljandi Gymnasium....23

2.2 The Participants....26

2.3 The Speaking Course and the Tasks Used....28

2.4 The Questionnaire....35

2.5 Analysis of the Results of the Feedback Questionnaire....36

2.6 Discussion and Reflection of the Action Research....46

CONCLUSION....49

APPENDICES....55

Appendix 1 Collection of Tasks suitable for year 10 students....55

Appendix 2 The Questionnaire....75

RESÜMEE....78

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AR	Action Research
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CV	CEFR Companion Volume
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ENCFL	Estonian National Curriculum for Foreign Languages
L2	Second Language
L3	Third Language
TBLT	Task-Based Language Teaching
WTC	Willingness to Communicate

INTRODUCTION

The thesis investigates the development of students' oral skills and willingness to communicate (WTC) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes for year 10 students within the context of an Estonian state gymnasium. The research aims to explore and implement task-based teaching strategies and evaluate their effects on students' willingness to communicate and their perceived development in speaking English through these tasks. The research question is formulated accordingly: what effect will a task-based EFL speaking course have on students' willingness to communicate and their perceived competence in speaking English?

The action research consists of creating and implementing a task-based speaking course with mostly open tasks suitable for year 10 EFL students, who come to study in Viljandi Gymnasium from very different backgrounds and schools. It has been a challenge to get the students to speak English with each other and the teachers at the beginning of the EFL classes. The aim of the task-based course, which involves a lot of open-ended interaction and no grading, is to create an atmosphere where students' willingness to communicate and self-confidence in speaking English are enhanced in a short time, during one speaking course of thirty 45-minute contact lessons. When willingness to communicate and confidence in speaking, which are interconnected (Dörnyei, 2001), are created, it is easier to increase language proficiency by scaffolding students' skills with advanced grammatical structures, new vocabulary, and other language components. Proficiency in a language is a dynamic and evolving skill that can be enhanced through focused learning, practise, and exposure to the target language. Estonian secondary school students read, watch and listen to content in English extensively on social and streaming media, but rarely get opportunities for oral interaction outside their English classes (European Language Proficiency Survey, 2012).

EFL speaking confidence comes with practice, and as in Estonia there are not many opportunities to practise speaking English outside schools, EFL teachers need to put emphasis on offering these possibilities during their classes. The author of the thesis has 10 years experience in working with 14-to-18-year-old Estonian students on international youth exchanges and -events, where students' initial fear and low self-confidence in oral interaction, after having learned English for five to eight years in school, have been noticeable. With the help of engaging activities and a supportive environment, where speaking English is constantly encouraged, students have rapidly gained confidence, more WTC and reduced their speaking anxiety, and their intrinsic motivation to learn English has increased and generally stayed high after the exchange week.

An additional aim of the compiled speaking course is to have materials ready for holding English language lessons outside, involving some physical activity (in the classroom or outside) which is also a way of reducing students' foreign language anxiety, and creating a different atmosphere for learning than the usual classroom seating arrangement. The Estonian initiative of Schools in Motion ('Liikuma Kutsuv Kool' in Estonian) has proven to help students focus their attention and increase intrinsic motivation, and overall enhance learning outcomes in class. Schools in Motion is inviting all schools to integrate physical activities into every lesson (Education Estonia, n.d.). Viljandi Gymnasium is about to become a pilot school for integrating the Schools in Motion programme into upper secondary education, previously the programme has been focusing on primary and basic schools, students aged 7-13 (Education Estonia, n.d.).

Estonian National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (2023) emphasises active participation of students in the learning process, student-centred learning, using authentic materials and methods that develop communication skills. The communicative principles and interactive learning methods should be the focal point in language teaching, all speaking in

class at the gymnasium level should be done in English (Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.). All these aspects were taken into consideration while compiling and implementing the tasks of the speaking course.

The tasks of the course are analysed by a questionnaire that reflects students' attitudes and evaluation of their WTC in English with their teacher and fellow students before and after the course on a scale from 1 to 10. The questionnaire includes open-ended questions of students' general feedback on how they felt during the activities and their ideas. The research data is subjective and only analyses students' perceived learning. No formal evaluation of students' speaking skills before or after the course is done.

Speaking skill is multifaceted and can be defined in various ways. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001, hereafter CEFR) differentiates between spoken production (giving presentations and speeches) and spoken interaction (oral communication between people - discussion, information exchange, interviewing or being interviewed, etc). The CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020, hereafter CV), however, suggests the terms to be changed to 'oral production' and 'oral interaction' to reflect the communicative function of the language activity, that in the foreign language context also includes pronunciation, described in the Phonological control scale (CV, 2020:134-135). The task-based course aims to raise students' willingness to interact as well as produce the language, and during the course also improve their pronunciation, vocabulary, and understanding of other speakers, so in this study mainly the term 'oral skills' is used, and throughout the thesis the terms 'speaking skills' and 'oral skills' are used interchangeably.

The thesis consists of an introduction, two main chapters, a conclusion, a list of references and appendices. The introduction identifies the research question and justification for the action research as well as describes the structure of the thesis. The first chapter,

Literature review, briefly describes the context of teaching English in Estonia, willingness to communicate, teaching practices of oral interaction, task-based language teaching and gives a short overview of open-ended tasks. The second chapter, the action research, describes the practices of teaching English in Viljandi Gymnasium, and presents the research done - the tasks compiled for the speaking course, the results and the analysis of the students' feedback questionnaire, as well as reflection of the action research. The conclusion summarises the thesis and describes the possibilities of integrating open tasks into English language teaching. The tasks of the course compiled during the action research are provided in Appendix 1. The questionnaire is provided in Appendix 2.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 1 gives an overview of the context of teaching English in Estonia, gives information of modern pedagogy and research conducted on oral language teaching practices, willingness to communicate and task-based teaching, with the separate subsection dedicated to open tasks.

1.1 The Estonian Context of Teaching English

The purpose of upper secondary education is to prepare students for their future as happy, creative, versatile, social, self-aware, active and responsible persons and citizens of the society (Estonian National Curriculum for Upper-Secondary School, 2023). English has become the universal means of communication for international teams and organisations in many countries, including Estonia; a large number of today's students live, study and work in other countries in their future, temporarily or for extended periods of time. Proficiency in the English language, consequently, becomes increasingly important. Understanding and addressing the challenges faced by teachers and students in Estonian upper secondary schools, and finding better ways to teach English contributes to more effective language teaching practices and improved language acquisition outcomes.

According to the Estonian National Curriculum of Foreign Languages (ENCFL), the study process should be based on a communicative approach and student-centred methods (Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.). ENCFL is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which highlights the aim of language teaching being the learners' abilities to cope in different communicative situations, reflecting ideas, and fulfilling various tasks in the target language. Both ENCFL and CEFR emphasise the importance of using diverse activities in teaching the language, including communicative pair- and group assignments, where students get to use oral language in class in authentic situations that they may encounter in their future life as speakers of the English language.

However, studies carried out in Estonian secondary schools (European Language Proficiency Survey, 2012:68; Niinimäki, 2017) have identified low success in the implementation of the communicative methods in foreign language teaching in Estonia, and find that teachers tend to focus on the individual tasks and preparation for the final exams more than students' abilities to use the language in authentic life situations that they might encounter upon graduation. Research has found Estonian teachers to be aware of the positive effects of communicative language tasks, but not using these regularly and systematically in language classes, especially with students of years 9-12 (European Language Proficiency Survey, 2012; Niinimäki, 2017).

Upper secondary education in Estonia means grades 10-12. During this period of study, students have to learn at least two foreign languages. English is the most frequently studied foreign language in Estonian schools as a second language (L2) (Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.) and most students are expected to reach B2 (upper independent speaker) level upon graduation of the upper secondary school (ENCFL Appendix 7, 2023). With five compulsory and at least two elective courses in English over the three years, students should be able to express their opinions, describe their impressions, compare and contrast things, their pronunciation and intonation should be clear and correct, their grammar and vocabulary should reach the advanced level. All this can only be achieved if students already have a good basis from their previous studies. Unfortunately, in reality, Estonian EFL students, who enter upper secondary education, often feel diffident in speaking English, and have low willingness to communicate with their classmates and their teachers (Niinimäki, 2017). European Language Proficiency Survey, conducted in 2012, found that around 40% of Estonian students did not reach B1 level by the end of 9th grade, around 14% of students were on A2 level and 20% on A1, and 6% did not achieve A1 language level in English. Moreover, 47% of students claimed that they are not able to express their opinions or arguments on everyday subjects

(European Language Proficiency Survey, 2012:28-30). Recent statistics paint a much better picture of year 9 students' English exam results, as the average score of 2022 and 2023 English exam takers was 88-89,5%, and only 1.5-3% of students got less than 50% (Norberg & Bogdanova, 2023). Since 2020 the final exam in English after year 9 is voluntary, not compulsory, so it has to be taken into consideration that the exam statistics represent only the 58% of Estonian 9th year graduates, who chose English as one of their final exams. Apparently, only the students with a very good command of English currently choose this exam (Norberg & Bogdanova, 2023). There is, unfortunately, no data collected about the English level of the rest of the 42% of secondary school graduates.

Upon graduation from the upper secondary education, the final exam in English is compulsory to all graduates. The report of the results of 2023 state and international English language exams indicates that 9% of the students reached C2 level, 35% C1, 33% B2, 14% B1 and only 9% of students did not achieve B1 language level (Muoni et al, 2023). The results vary every year, but it can be seen that improvement since 2012 has been significant. On the other hand, Estonian students perceived speaking confidence has not been measured or analysed by recent studies and the teachers and youth-workers notice that many students have difficulties with fluent communication and speaking confidence in authentic speaking situations, like international student events, student exchanges, and low willingness to communicate in English with their teachers and peers.

For fluent and confident interaction, language learners need to be actively engaged and immersed in the learning tasks, as Nunan (1995) and Ellis et al (2020) emphasise, implicit knowledge comes from doing things and absorbing information from the surrounding environment, rather than sitting down and studying. It occurs when learners learn without conscious attention to linguistic forms in the input and output (Dörnyei, 2001). Without opportunities to use and connect the language studied in class with tasks that involve using

the language, learners' knowledge about language may never become the ability to use it and the probability of language learning is diminished (Kerr, 2017). This is why EFL teachers in Estonia should use more communicative and open-ended tasks in their language classes.

1.2 Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is one of the affective factors found to be influencing the success in L2 learning (Baghaei and Dourakhshan, 2012). Researchers have found that the higher WTC a speaker has, the more likely she/he is to succeed in language acquisition. High levels of anxiety in speaking a foreign language, and the fear of making mistakes in speaking, can significantly hinder WTC in students.

Frequency of opportunities can affect WTC positively - if students regularly have possibilities to use the language in authentic contexts, they are likely to develop an increasing WTC (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). Additionally, if the learning environment is supportive, engaging and students feel safe, their WTC is found to be increased (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). An encouraging, friendly and supportive teacher, who sees making mistakes as a way of learning, and creates a cooperative learning environment, can be one of the key factors in diminishing students' foreign language anxiety, expand their oral skills and enhance their self-confidence in interaction in the foreign language (Dörnyei, 2001; Piechurska-Kuciel, 2007; Guilloteaux and Dörnyei, 2008; Badea, 2015). Niinimäki (2017) validates the arguments with the results of her study in Estonian upper secondary education showing that students in a supportive learning environment with the emphasis on cooperative tasks, were more confident in speaking and their results in the English language increased, compared to the other group, where teacher-centred methods were used. Her research was conducted with 48 EFL learners in 10th grade.

In addition to creating a positive and supportive speaking environment, the teachers are expected to use more communicative and cooperative tasks, open-ended language tasks, simulations and role-plays, so the students can learn from each other and focus on producing meaningful and understandable sentences rather than just grammatically correct phrases (ENCFL, 2023). Exposure to diverse communication settings - group discussions, presentations, pair conversations, role-play and open-ended group tasks, can also positively impact WTC and become a stimulus for grammar and vocabulary learning, it is possible to learn a language and enjoy oneself at the same time (Badea, 2015). Students are more likely to engage with a task when the topic interests them, and they will have greater emotional investment in completing the task if it has been based on an idea that they proposed (Hendra and Jones, 2018). Immersive speaking tasks, where students are actively involved in expressing and sharing ideas to complete a group task, support learning, boost self-esteem and increase students' intrinsic motivation, allowing them to feel they are making progress in their ultimate goal of becoming competent communicators (Hendra and Jones, 2018). When the confidence in speaking rises, it has been noticed that students motivation and engagement in English studies also increases.

WTC, however, can not be increased by just putting emphasis on students' language proficiency. Extensive research has been done to evaluate the relationship between willingness to communicate and English language proficiency - Baghaei and Dourakhsan (2012) with Iranian learners and Khoiriyah and Ciptaningrum (2020) with graduate students majoring in English Language Education in Indonesia, have found that there is no significant correlation between WTC and English language proficiency. The students with higher proficiency level do not necessarily have a higher willingness to communicate. Before these studies, Dörnyei (2001) also acknowledged that WTC is affected by the surrounding environment and personality more than the capability of using the language. Personality

influences not only speaking in a foreign language, but all communication. Extraverted individuals with higher self-esteem might be more willing to express themselves, while introverted persons are generally more reserved and less willing to communicate in their native language as well. A lot of students are experiencing fear of making mistakes, it can be the result of criticism they have received previously, lack of experience in speaking a foreign language or self-consciousness (Dörnyei, 2001; Kongi, 2015; Niinimäki, 2017). Social dynamics and relationships within a group can furthermore either encourage or discourage students from participating in communication activities, and general communication apprehension can impede students' WTC.

WTC is also considered to be a part of intrinsic motivation, which is a crucial factor in language learning, influencing the learning process and outcomes. Motivation is based on a combination of factors, including teacher influence, learning atmosphere, personal attitude towards learning in general and the subject, and parental influence (Dörnyei, 2001; Hendra and Jones, 2018). The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation further highlights the complexity of this concept. Guilloteaux and Dörneyi (2008) found that teachers play a significant role in promoting learner motivation and interest, and when the learning environment is supportive and engaging, students generally have higher motivation to attend classes and take part in different activities in class. Students who are intrinsically motivated to learn the language are also more likely to engage in communication willingly. Anxiety about being judged or misunderstood by the teachers and the peers may hinder participation and lower the intrinsic motivation. All these factors should be taken into consideration when increasing students' WTC in the language class in in focus.

1.3 Oral Skills and Modern Pedagogy

Traditionally, language competence has been divided into four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In the action research within the current MA thesis, the main focus is on the speaking skills. Speaking is one of the most challenging skills to learn in a foreign language. Several researchers, Nunan (1995), Ur (1996), Hendra and Jones (2018), have claimed speaking as being the most difficult, but also the most important aspect of learning a foreign language when compared to the other three language skills, because individuals who learn a language are referred to as the speakers of that language and outside the language classroom students are expected to be able to hold conversations and interact in that language foremost.

The aspects usually focused on when teaching speaking skills are fluency, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. In modern pedagogy (‘*nüüdisaegne õpikäsitus’* in Estonian) a lot of emphasis is put on interdisciplinary teaching and learning - in addition to a certain subject or a foreign language, students need to learn communication and cooperation skills, decision-making and analytical skills, gain cultural competence and -awareness that in the modern society are as important as the knowledge they get in lessons (De Kock et al, 2004). Communication and cooperation skills are in focus also in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT emphasizes interactive and meaningful communication, encouraging students to use the target language in authentic situations, and practising speaking with each other and the teacher in language lessons with the goal of acquiring communicative competence (Richards, 2006).

Student-centred learning is another focus of modern pedagogy. This involves active student participation, collaborative activities, and personalised learning experiences tailored to individual needs and preferences (O’Neill & Mac Mahon, 2003). During upper secondary education, most of the students start to think about what they will be doing after graduation -

going to international universities and working in multinational teams, for example. Therefore, it is important to use authentic materials and expose students to the nuances of language as it is used in these contexts as well. Language learning in the modern context goes beyond linguistic complexity and accuracy; it includes seeing learners as social agents, fostering a global perspective, students should be encouraged to explore and appreciate diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives and gain a broader understanding of the interconnected world, while using the language as a vehicle for communication, rather than a subject to learn (CV, 2020:29-30). By incorporating all these aspects into foreign language education, modern pedagogy aims to create a dynamic and effective learning environment that prepares students for using English effectively in a variety of situations and fosters a lifelong appreciation for language and culture.

The speaking tasks in higher level EFL classes should be interesting and challenging for students. Meaningful interaction and full engagement are the key elements of successful speaking tasks in class that immerse students in learning the language. At higher language levels students usually enjoy opportunities for cooperating in analysing and evaluating information, solving challenges and creating something new together (Hendra and Jones, 2018), although there are always the ones that choose to do tasks individually, if allowed. Cooperation in class teaches more than competition or individual work; most modern learning environments clearly avoid situations requiring learners to compete because sharing and construction of knowledge is hindered under competitive circumstances. Striving toward the construction of knowledge and gaining self-confidence in speaking implies attention to the process of learning, not the competition between the learners (De Kock et al, 2004).

During cooperative communicative tasks in small groups, students learn from each other and focus on producing meaningful and understandable sentences rather than grammatically correct phrases, and improve their language fluency by having to get their

message across to their peers. Piechurska-Kuciel (2011) suggests that using cooperative learning and creating regular opportunities for students to speak to each other in the learned language helps them gradually feel less anxiety in the language class and count on one another's help to feel more competent and confident in speaking.

Cooperative tasks also have a great educational value. Celce-Murcia (2007) has found that learning activities that are richly situated, fully meaningful and contextualised can give students an excellent understanding of grammar simultaneously. She argues that the efficiency is much greater than when using any grammatical sentence-drill. A well-chosen subject matter of language lessons is the root of increased learning motivation and it is best done with tasks that have a goal to achieve or a mission to complete. When learning is interesting and the right kind of tasks are created, most students are keen to also be engaged with potentially more difficult challenges (Dörnyei, 2001). In her MA thesis, Kass (2020) illustrates the importance of teachers always varying the activities used in the lessons, so that each student feels involved in the most suitable way, as different learners prefer different activities. Based on the success during her action research, Kass encourages teachers to adapt communicative games and create a relaxed atmosphere, where students can take an interactive role within a cooperative environment and immerse themselves in a lot of oral production. Ur (1991) supports her findings by bringing out the characteristics of a successful speaking activity:

1. Learners talk a lot;
2. Participation is even, all students contribute;
3. Learners are eager to speak, motivation is high;
4. Learners express themselves in relevant utterances, on an acceptable level of language accuracy.

In conclusion to his extensive studies, Ur comments that in practice only a few classroom activities succeed in satisfying all the criteria. For the students to contribute and have

extended and more complex discourse, problem-solving and analytical tasks have been found to be beneficial. During these tasks students are encouraged to negotiate meaning and ask questions from each other, use their creativity and negotiation skills (Hendra and Jones, 2018), students are immersed in the language, and have to use it in creating understandable oral discourse, without paying too much attention to grammar or making mistakes. When students help each other and do the communicative tasks together, their speaking and interacting skills, and confidence improves gradually.

1.4 Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a teaching method that has gained prominence as an approach to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) since the 1980s. This chapter explores the theoretical foundations, principles, and practical applications of TBLT in EFL settings in enhancing language proficiency.

TBLT revolves around the completion of communicative tasks. It emphasises the use of tasks to create a natural context for language learning, with a focus on performance rather than grammar or vocabulary. Fluency is gained through completing the tasks in groups and learning from each other during the activities (Prabhu, 1987; Ellis et al, 2020). The fundamental principles of TBLT are focus on meaning, task completion, and the integration of language skills within meaningful activities (Willis & Willis, 2007).

A task in the language teaching context is a well structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a language and its use during communication, so it could be both a brief exercise and a thorough work-plan (Ellis et al, 2020: 6-10). A good task should bear some resemblance to a task that people perform in real life, should also be appropriate and meaningful for the age-group taught. A task is a meaning-focused activity, so it requires learners to focus on the meaningful

communication rather than form (Ellis et al, 2020). The language needed to perform a task should be negotiable by the students as the task is performed. A task should include a sense of completeness and stand alone as a communicative act in its own right (Nunan, 1995). Ellis et al (2020) have proposed four criteria to define a task in language learning:

1. The primary focus is on meaning;
2. There is some kind of gap;
3. Learners rely mainly on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources;
4. There is a defined communicative outcome.

With the criteria in mind, in foreign language learning tasks include role-plays, problem-solving activities, information gathering with analysis, short projects, and different activities that provide students with opportunities to apply language skills in practical and authentic scenarios for extended periods in class (Ellis et al, 2020). Nunan (1995) suggests that basing teaching on tasks avoids the traditional distinction between syllabus and methodology. The starting point is the selection of the tasks for particular lessons and students.

Prabhu (1987) has distinguished three types of language learning tasks through different gaps, based on how the information is handled by the learners:

1. Information gap tasks involve transferring information from one person to another, one form to another, or from one place to another;

2. Reasoning gap tasks, where new information is derived from given information through the process of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of patterns or relationships;

3. Opinion gap tasks, where people express their preferences, feelings, opinions or attitudes to a given situation or information.

TBLT generally has 3 stages - a pre-task, main task and post-task (Ellis, 2003), but they can occur in different lessons. The pre-task stage serves to prepare the learners for the main task, motivate them and raise their interest. It can be done in the previous lesson, for example, brainstorming about a topic before a class debate, and it also involves giving students some vocabulary to complete the task and background information if needed. The pre-task should not include large amounts of new language or grammar structures, in order not to change the task into a language learning activity. During the implementation of the main task, teachers are encouraged to let their students choose their linguistic repertoire and not correct their language, in order to encourage fluent oral production (Ellis et al, 2020). The post-task stage offers good opportunities for form-focused activities as well as task-related reflection. The teacher can isolate specific linguistic forms and prepare activities to practise or develop awareness of linguistic features the learners experienced difficulties with when they performed the task (Willis and Willis, 2007; Ellis et al 2020). The reflection and self-assessment of students on their performance can be done right after the completion of the task, but can also be left for the next lesson, to leave some time for thinking about what happened.

In task-based teaching, teachers should use formative assessment to obtain information during the whole process about how learners perform the tasks, whether they achieve the desired outcome, and how actively engaged they are when they perform the task. The goal is to help students improve constantly rather than measure their knowledge at a certain time. Another aspect of formative assessment in task-based teaching is to understand and analyse how the task might be improved for future use (Ellis et al, 2020). In conclusion, task-based teaching provides a great opportunity for teachers to gradually enhance students' willingness to communicate and their confidence in speaking English, with immersing students in doing tasks that include speaking in the learned language with each other regularly.

1.4.1 Open-Ended Speaking Tasks

Tasks can be divided into open and closed tasks. A closed task has one correct answer or a solution that learners must arrive at, like solving a mystery or a riddle, matching people with suitable jobs and spotting the differences. In an open task, on the contrary, there is no predefined correct solution and the outcome is unpredictable (Hendra and Jones, 2018). Open-ended speaking tasks with no pre-defined outcomes, putting students in different authentic speaking situations, improve their creativity, intelligence and decision-making abilities and therefore in the longer perspective prepare them for their life (Zondag et al, 2020). Open-ended and active tasks, where participants have to observe the activities of others and react accordingly without having a script or a set of words or phrases to use, make learning more engaging, creative and effective (Lobman and Lundquist, 2007; Kitsnik and Hallas, 2020; Zondag et al 2020). Open-ended tasks can offer a close parallel to authentic foreign language dialogue and a playful approach to developing speaking confidence. Interesting and challenging, sometimes also funny tasks in the foreign language classroom help to motivate students, stimulate their thinking processes, enhance interactivity and confidence and support their cooperation. Many of the open ended, improvisational speaking tasks have a clear connection to communicative language teaching (Zondag et al, 2020).

Research has shown a positive impact of open-ended speaking tasks on EFL students' speaking confidence and -ability. Open tasks include a debate, ranking something, explaining one’s activity or ideas, discussions and free conversation on certain topics or what can be the solutions to the problems we encounter (Hendra and Jones, 2018). When students successfully complete challenging tasks, they experience a sense of accomplishment and growth in their abilities, this positive reinforcement in turn fuels their intrinsic motivation for further learning. Deep engagement with the material can lead to stronger understanding of the subject

and the language components involved. All these findings have been taken as a basis for compiling the the open tasks in the action research described in Chapter 2.

2 ACTION RESEARCH

Chapter 2 describes the action research - creating the course, implementing it with 2 groups of participants and collecting the subjective feedback to the tasks and the learning outcomes through the questionnaire, and analysing the results.

Action research (AR) is a type of practical research that involves a research cycle, where teachers investigate specific aspects of their own practice in their classrooms. The cycle involves a planning stage, an implementation phase where observations are made and data is collected, and a reflection phase, which can lead to further action. Action research is often problem-oriented or motivated by the need to find better ways of teaching or solving identified teaching problems (Lesha, 2014). The author of the thesis is using AR to find solutions to the students' low willingness to communicate in English, and try out and analyse the methods described in Chapter 1 - communicative, task-based teaching and open tasks, in solving the problem.

2.1 The Context of Teaching English at Viljandi Gymnasium

In Estonia, students learn at least two foreign languages at school, as L2 and L3. According to the ENCFL (2023), students of Estonian schools can learn English, French, German or Russian as their first foreign language with the majority of students learning English (Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.).

At upper secondary level, students should reach the independent user (CEFR levels B1 and B2) level in two foreign languages (ENCFL, 2023). Most of the students who enter the state gymnasium in Viljandi, have been learning English as L2 for 7-8 years in their previous schools and are on B1 level, but there are always students that are on A2 or lower level.

Recent years have shown a decrease in students' level of English upon entering the Viljandi Gymnasium according to the English teachers.

The gymnasium accepts around 180 new students every year and they come from very different schools and backgrounds. In Viljandi Gymnasium the curriculum focuses on supporting successful studying through a good learning environment, taking into consideration students' individual abilities and interests so that every student can develop to their full potential (Curriculum of Viljandi Gymnasium, 2023).

English is taught throughout the three years of gymnasium and the final exams in English give a perspective and a goal to learn more advanced English. ⅔ of the students (100-120 students every year) take the Cambridge C1 Advanced (CAE) exam in their third year of gymnasium, and 75% of the students achieve C1 level. Every year about 10% of the students get C2 proficiency level CAE certificate and around 15% receive B2 CAE certificate. Around 60-70 students take the state exam in English and of these most of the students get B1 or B2 level scores. Depending on the year and specific students, a few (some years one-two, some years 0) students do not achieve 50% on the state exam.

The study groups of English are formed during the first English lessons, where all students take a computer-based placement test that tests their vocabulary, grammar and reading (comprehension) skills. Oral language is not assessed, so the 11 study groups of 15-18 students that are formed according to the results of the online placement test, consist of students who are on a similar level in written English, vocabulary and grammar, but have very different oral capacities, courage and willingness to speak.

The school-year is divided into five periods, each period lasting for seven weeks. Each student has seven to eight courses in a period (Curriculum of Viljandi Gymnasium, 2023). Most courses in Viljandi Gymnasium consist of 35 lessons during a seven-week period, of which the seventh week (five lessons) is meant for assessment and study visits. The five

lessons per week for the six weeks prior to the assessment week are mostly two double lessons, lasting 90 minutes, and in agreement with the students either have or do not have a break in between, and one 45-minute single lesson.

In addition to five compulsory courses, the school provides three to five additional courses of English (Speaking, Writing, Grammar, Practical English, etc) and some CLIL courses (Business English, Country Study, British/American Literature, etc) to the students throughout the three years of their studies, one of the additional courses being a speaking course focusing mostly on fluency. Two groups of EFL students had their B2 speaking courses with the author of the current thesis in January and February 2024.

The main aim of the compiled speaking course was to create a supportive and cooperative atmosphere for learning, interesting and enough challenging tasks, where students' willingness to communicate could increase without their attention to it, where they help each other and focus on the creative tasks. An additional aim was to create more opportunities to move around in class, as providing some physical activities in every subject is one of the recent goals of Viljandi Gymnasium, being a pilot school for upper secondary schools in the Schools in Motion program. Unfortunately, the language classrooms are relatively small in Viljandi Gymnasium, there is not much space for students to move around in class. The classrooms are shared, teachers do not have their own classrooms. If the teacher rearranges the classroom, and changes the setting of the desks and chairs, everything has to be back to how it was by the end of the lessons given there. Between lessons there is usually only a 10-15-minute break, so in these circumstances it is fairly difficult to create a more creative or cooperative atmosphere in the classroom to support motion and physical activity. Fortunately, there is a big backyard, and weather allowing, lessons can be held outside. In January and February, it was too cold to have lessons outside, but in autumn and spring the students (and some teachers) enjoy having lessons in the open air. Most of the tasks of the

course are selected so that the lessons can be held outside, need a minimum amount of equipment and preparation from the teacher.

2.2 The Participants

The action research was conducted with two groups of English L2 learners during their first year of studying in Viljandi Gymnasium: one of the groups being on a perceived higher, B2-C1 language level with 18 students and the other on a perceived B1-B2 level group with 15 students. The level of their English oral skills was not evaluated prior to the course, but was estimated by the teacher during the first lessons, where the students already had communicative tasks of asking questions from each other and finding people with certain qualities in their class and reporting their findings. The English language groups in Viljandi Gymnasium are formed according to the written placement tests and the level of oral skills is often unequal within the group.

Altogether the action research involved 33 students, of whom 31 answered the questionnaire at the end of the course. 23 students were aged 16 and 10 students aged 17 during the study. Most of the students had been studying English for seven years before the course, one student for nine years, and one student in the lower-level group only three years.

The first group always wanted to have a break of 15 minutes in between the lessons and the other group almost always wanted to do 90 minutes straight and thus have a longer break after the double lessons. It was understood by the teacher that the first group wanted the break because their speaking lessons started at 8:15 in the morning and at 9:00 the school cafeteria offers breakfast to everyone. It is a popular gathering time for students from different classes and the students wanted to go there. If the lessons had been later, they might have also wanted to have 90 minutes straight, as at this age, with variative activities, the students are usually able to study for 90 minutes without a pause.

At the beginning of the course, the teacher agreed with the students to speak only English in the English classroom. Students were allowed to ask for specific words from the teacher or their classmates if they needed them or ask for explanations/translations of the tasks if they did not understand them fully, but other than that all communication had to be done in English. During the course, especially during the first group-work tasks, some students tried to veer away from the agreement, so the teacher had to remind them of it several times. Some students even smilingly shook their heads in reaction to the reminder and took a moment to get used to the idea, although initially they had all agreed to the rule and understood it was for their own language-learning benefits. It can be understood that it is difficult to come from mostly Estonian-speaking EFL classes in secondary schools and switch over to only English-speaking EFL classes, but the students got used to it in a few lessons. Students sometimes inquired the teacher about the vocabulary item that they did not know or remember, especially in the second group. The first group asked for words mostly from each other or found other ways to express what they wanted to say.

The participants had already had one to two compulsory courses of English together in the beginning of the schoolyear, one group with the author of the thesis and the other with another English teacher. Nevertheless, it is always good to start with creating better group cohesion, and one way of doing it is by getting to know each other better. This is why Getting-to-know tasks were added to the course. During the first lesson the participants of the course had to carry out a survey in class with questions they had compiled themselves about what they wanted to know about the other students in their group - see Appendix 1, Survey in Class. The teacher also participated in the activity and asked the question of how confident the students were feeling in speaking English in class. From this activity, the teacher found out that in the first group with 18 students, three did not feel confident at all and the rest claimed to be quite confident in speaking English with their peers. On the contrary, the second

group with 15 somewhat lower level students only had three students who said they felt confident in speaking, and the rest were hesitant and diffident in speaking English in the beginning.

The first group of students turned out to be more competitive and active during the tasks, the second group needed more encouragement to go and communicate with different classmates, and if they were allowed, they always chose to stay together with their desk mates for pair- and group-work activities. The teacher allowed comfort groups during the first half of the course but afterwards found ways to separate them, for example letting them choose Uno play cards and making groups according to the colours or numbers on the cards. Gradually all the students seemed to become more relaxed and opened up to speaking with different people in class, and at the end of the course one of the students of the second group wrote in the feedback: “We have a supportive and friendly class in English!”. Some other students claimed that speaking in English was not as scary as they initially thought it would be.

Evaluation of the tasks and the perceived results in the students’ WTC and confidence in speaking was done at the end of the course in written form with a questionnaire, described in section 2.4 and the comprehensive analysis of the answers is given in section 2.5.

2.3 The Speaking Course and the Tasks Used

The speaking course was carried out in Viljandi Gymnasium in January-February 2024 with two groups, altogether 33 students in their first year of gymnasium (10th grade). During the initial planning of the course, the interdisciplinary competencies described in the Estonian National Curriculum, the main principles of the modern teaching theory and the types of speaking tasks of the National and Cambridge C1 Advanced (CAE) exams were taken as a basis of the oral tasks compiled. The teacher of the course had no previous experience with

speaking courses or teaching oral English for a full course, just experience in working with youth groups in informal education, including international youth exchanges, and practice lessons during the MA studies at the university.

The previous teachers of the speaking course explained that they have been focusing on the task of comparing pictures in the first year and practising it together with teaching new vocabulary and going through some topics of the textbook they have for the specific group. For this speaking course no textbooks were used, but most of the tasks of the course can be adjusted to suit the topics of any English textbook and complement the language learning activities of the textbooks.

Curriculum of Viljandi Gymnasium states the development of the general competencies, described also in the National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools (2023), as important aspects of successful learning. The general competencies developed in all subjects are cultural and values competence, social, civic, self-determination, learning, communication, entrepreneurship and digital competencies and competence in mathematics, science and technology. The students are expected to be able to have an opinion, present it, explain, and if needed, defend their opinions on various topics (ENCFL, 2023). These competencies and general expectations, as well as the students age, were taken as a basis for creating this speaking course.

As Kass (2020) has advised in her master's thesis, communicative learning activities are the most effective when the teacher knows how to motivate the specific study group, how they get along with each other, and what their interests, fears, hopes and beliefs are. That is why the first lessons of the course included tasks where the students' interests and personalities were discovered during the interviews/research that students had to make about each other, like Find Someone Who, where they had to find students with similar interests, and Two Truths and a Lie, and Survey in Class, where interesting information about the

students was collected by the peers and the teacher, and the tasks already required oral interaction in English.

During the action research, a collection of mostly open-ended tasks for oral interaction was compiled and modified by the author of the thesis according to the participants and the ENCFL. The students' interests were observed during the first lessons, where they had to write questions and topics they wanted to talk about; current topical issues, news, or discussion topics at school (for example starting time of the schooldays was a topic discussed at Viljandi Gymnasium at the time, as several primary schools in Viljandi had changed their starting times to 9 am). Students are more likely to engage with a task when the topic is interesting for them and therefore, choosing an engaging, enough challenging, but not overly difficult topic, is essential (Hendra & Jones, 2018). The overarching topics in the National Curriculum and the curriculum of the Viljandi Gymnasium are lifelong learning and career planning, education and science, environment and sustainable development, citizenship and entrepreneurship, cultural identity and creativity, the environment of information, technology and innovation, health and safety, values and morals (Ministry of Research and Education, 2023; Viljandi Gymnasium, 2023). These were taken into consideration while choosing the topics for discussions and group-work tasks, as well as the specific interests of the students in the two groups.

The activities of the course are both topic-based and task-based. In topic-based tasks the students are asked to talk about a (controversial) subject, the main objective being the discussion process itself. In task-based tasks students are asked to perform an outcome, whilst the discussion being the means to reach the outcome (Ur, 1991).

The tasks of the course are collected from previous youth work seminars, international youth exchanges, youth camps and several internet sources over the 11 years of working with enhancing youth entrepreneurship, and modified for the needs and interests of year 10

students in upper secondary education. With these tasks, it is difficult to refer to the origin, as the creators are often not known and all the leaders add their own aspects. Most of the tasks of the course are open tasks, but some other language learning activities were also added to meet the curriculum and the expectations of the speaking course, also to create more diversity of tasks. Two of the activities, the "Needs Analysis Challenge" board game about learning and teaching and "Secret Sentences" agreeing and disagreeing discussion-game, were taken from Jason Anderson's book "*Speaking games. Photocopiable activities to make language learning fun*" (2020) and are not described in the thesis. In addition to the tasks listed in Appendix 1, one double-lesson of the course was dedicated to practicing pronunciation of challenging words in English, and one to introducing the format of the CAE exam speaking paper with opportunities of trying out the different parts of it with peer students, and in one of the last double-lessons for both groups a guest-teacher from Morocco talked to students about Moroccan languages, culture and traditions, the students had prepared questions for discussion and later gave feedback to the lesson.

A majority of the speaking tasks described in Appendix 1 require minimal resources and can be carried out with different-sized groups in class or outside. Gymnasium students have long schooldays inside the schoolhouse, and the opportunities to go outside and move around during the English lessons within the school days when the weather is nice, are usually highly appreciated. With most of the tasks of the course, English can be learned and practised while moving around in the yard or the schoolhouse.

Most of the lessons are based on the components of the task-based learning framework, with the pre-task, which introduces the topic and some of the language functions used, the main task, during which language is actively used by the students, and follow-up activities or analysis of the studied language items. The pre-tasks and follow-up activities are not described in detail, but in some cases mentioned in the description of the activities.

The lessons of the course started with a warm-up activity that was combined with the topic of the lesson or the subject matter, so also served as a pre-task. Some of the warm-up activities include throwing the ball to each other saying an adjective or a word with a certain topic, Associations, Who Am I, Riddles, Video/Picture Guessing, etc. The 10 warm-up activities included are also good for creating a supportive and engaging atmosphere. Some of these can be used to activate students' schemata on a certain topic of the upcoming lesson or as a reminder of the learnt language from the last lesson, so can be taken as pre- and post-tasks for the main tasks. Most of the warm-up activities take 10-20 minutes, depending on the size of the group and the specific students.

The collection compiled during the current study includes five activities for getting to know each other, as when students come from different schools and do not know each other from previous studies, they first need to get acquainted. For the study groups that already know each other well, these activities are not needed, or the teacher can choose one or two. Two Truths and a Lie is always a creative and engaging speaking task to do with students, and it is a good way for the students to get to know something interesting about their teacher too. Creating a good and friendly atmosphere is easier when the teacher is familiar with the students and when mutual trust is established.

The main part of the course consists of mostly open-ended tasks suitable for developing English oral skills in upper secondary education. There are 21 open tasks listed, and an additional resource bank of controversial topics interesting for this age group. The tasks develop different sub-skills and language functions, can easily be adjusted to various topics and levels of speakers, and generally do not need much preparation from the teacher. Most of the tasks can be adjusted to suit the student exchanges or international youth camps, where students from different backgrounds need to start speaking English to each other in a limited timeframe. If not stated otherwise, the main tasks take 35-45 minutes to complete, faster

thinking and more fluent students can complete them faster, but some groups can get so immersed in a task that it is difficult to make them finish even at the end of the lesson.

During the study process constant monitoring and analysis of the activities, the mood of the students, the outcome, the instructions given, and the time spent on the task was carried out. Notes were taken by the teacher at the end of every lesson and the necessary comments are written in Appendix 1 under the notes of the tasks.

No formal grading was done to the students, the teacher used constant encouragement and supporting the students in order to motivate them to carry out the tasks and gradually gain willingness, confidence and fluency in speaking English. Formative assessment was the main mean of obtaining information about the students and the tasks during the whole course.

List of the tasks and activities compiled:

Getting to know

1. A Story of Your Name
2. Find Someone Who
3. I Am Special Because
4. Two Truths and a Lie
5. Tell Me Three Things About Your Neighbour / New Friend

Warm-ups

6. Who Am I?
7. Synonyms-Antonyms
8. Yes, but.. Yes, and..
9. What Am I Thinking About?
10. Picture in a Story
11. Give Away Your New Words
12. Change Places
13. Associations
14. Riddles
15. Video/Picture Guessing

Main speaking tasks

1. Survey in Class
2. Expert Interviews
3. Finding Solutions
4. Top Ten
5. One-Minute Speech - Basic and Competitive
6. My Life As A …
7. Dreams
8. Describe a Picture and Draw
9. Agree and Disagree Corners
10. Scales
11. Contrasting
12. Excuses
13. Nonsense Word Definitions
14. Stories/Alphabet stories
15. A Story With the First Sentence Given
16. Why? Because
17. Advertising
18. My Perfect Future
19. Job-Interview
20. Role-Play
21. Debate

Controversial topics for discussion

All the tasks of the course are described in Appendix 1 from the teachers' perspective and have variations and teacher notes included with recommendations for adaptations, according to the experiences gained during the action research.

The speaking course can be finished with an evaluation of oral skills if needed. This course was concluded with a non-graded picture comparison task in pairs during the assessment week, according to the format of the CAE exam, with one student at a time

comparing the pictures and answering the given question, and the partner answering an additional question at the end. The teacher compiled the pairs according to who had talked to each other the least during the classes, also taking into account the talkativeness of some students, and the quieter nature of the others. The quieter students were assigned to be together in pairs and the very talkative students came to do the speaking task together. In two pairs the students were, nevertheless, quite different in nature, and it showed also in their speaking outcome - one of them was much more active than the other and started to dominate a little. In general, it did work for the short picture comparison task, but for more interactive exam tasks, it can be challenging.

2.4 The Questionnaire

The initial questionnaire on WTC was taken from Khoiriyah and Ciptaningrum (2019), and was first tested with five students who attended an international youth exchange in the UK in October 2022 with the author of the thesis. Analysing these students' WTC in English before and after the one-week youth exchange showed clearly, that the students, who decided to go on a youth exchange already were willing communicators even before the intervention, and the results after the youth exchange showed the same high level of WTC (score 4 and 5 on the scale of 1-5). As the school environment generally does not provide students with opportunities to speak English to native speakers or other speakers of English, except the English teacher and classmates, the questions were modified accordingly, and focused on WTC to fellow students and the English teacher.

Questions number 3, 4 and 6 were added, with slight modifications, from the MA thesis of Kass (2020, Appendix 4) to the WTC questionnaire and the open question of writing any comments on the speaking tasks, the course or the teacher was included. The scale of the

answers was extended to 1-10 for having more variation in answering. The questionnaire was created in Google Drive and can be found in Appendix 2.

The questionnaire was anonymous and filled out online in class at the end of the course. The students were informed about the results being used in writing the evaluation of the speaking course of the Master thesis and possible future research. Collecting closed and open-ended data gave a good overview of the perceptions of the students and their feelings after the course.

Initially, it was planned that some English teachers also visit the lessons of the speaking course and provide their feedback, but in reality, it did not happen due to the workload of the teachers, and the lessons with other language groups taking place at the same time, so no peer teachers' feedback has been received or taken into account.

2.5 Analysis of the Results of the Feedback Questionnaire

The feedback questionnaire on WTC and the perceived learning value of the speaking tasks carried out during the course was filled out online (Google Forms) with all the students present at the end of the last lesson of the course. In both groups, one student did not fill out the questionnaire as they did not attend the last lesson.

Of the 33 participants in the course, 31 students answered the questionnaire, nine of them were male and 22 female. 22 respondents were at the age of 16 and nine were 17, the average age being 16.29 years at the end of the course. Most of the students had been learning English for seven years before answering the questionnaire, two students reported nine years of studying English, and one student in the second group only three years.

The students were asked which was their perceived weakest subskill in English and the results show most of them consider speaking and writing their weakest skills. The questionnaire allowed them to mark several skills, and nine students used the opportunity,

with one student in the second group marking all four subskills as her weakest. Six students marked both writing and speaking. In conclusion, five students answered listening, five students reading, 13 students (33.3%) indicated speaking, and 18 writing as their weakest subskill, as shown in Figure 1. The results are in correspondence with the study of Niinimäki (2017), where 35.5% of the year 10 students said speaking is the most difficult subskill for them.

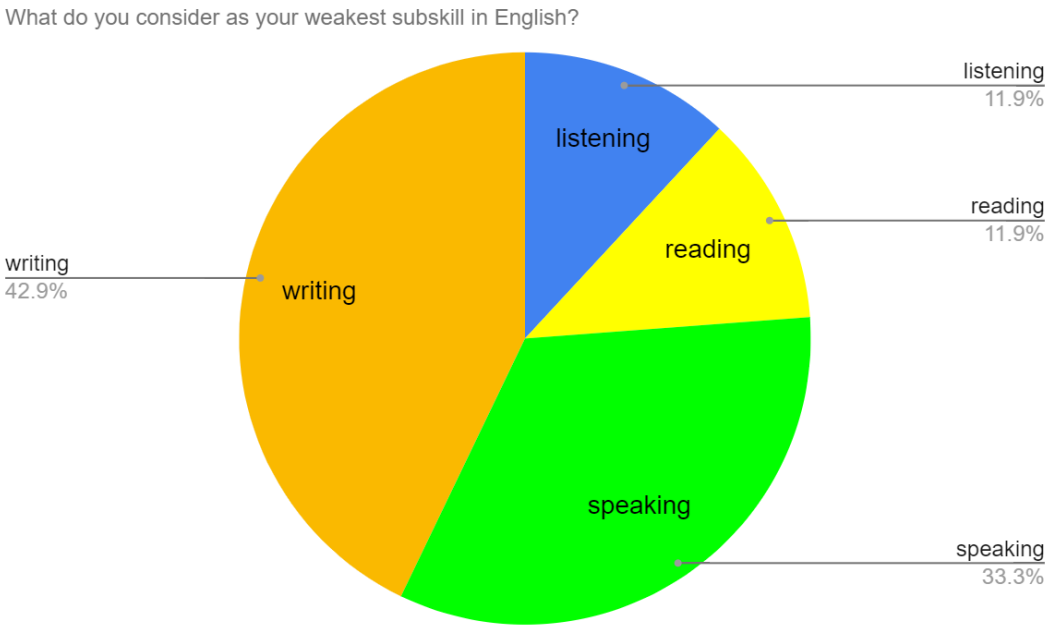

Figure 1. Students' perceived weakest subskills in English

The next question was about evaluating students' perceived competence in speaking English before the speaking course in VG on a scale from 1 to 10. Number 1 meaning that one could not speak any English at all and 10 meaning that one could speak perfect English in every situation and about any topic. The average score was 6.65, with extremes of one student with a score of 9, and two students with a score of 4. No students were on the highest level of self-confidence of being able to speak perfect English in every situation. The overview of the scores the students gave themselves before the speaking course is given in Figure 2.

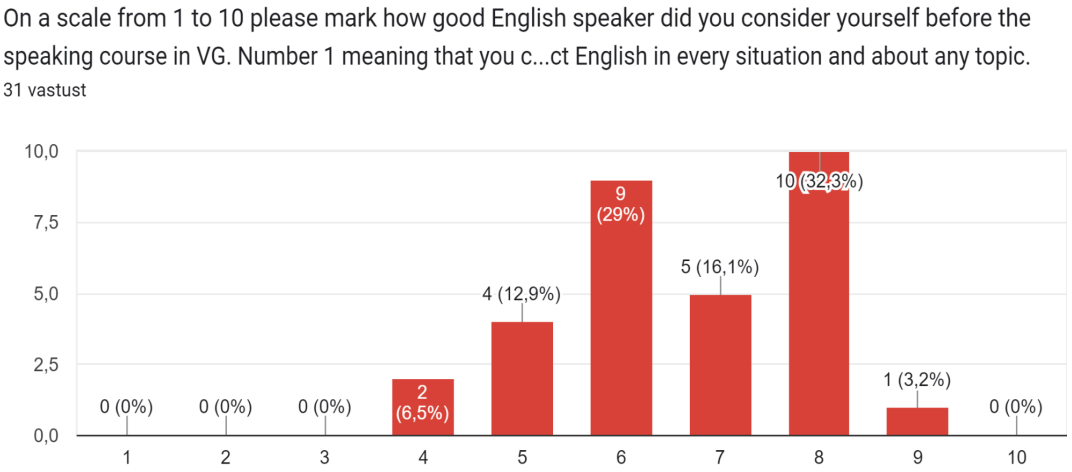

Figure 2. Students' evaluation of their speaking skills before the course on a scale of 1 to 10

After the course the perceived speaking skill had risen to 7.77, with only one student being in the middle score of 5, all the rest of the students being above it, and quite equally answering 7, 8 and 9. One student had increased her speaking confidence so much that she answered 10 - "I can speak perfect English in every situation". The students' perceived speaking skills after the course are shown in Figure 3.

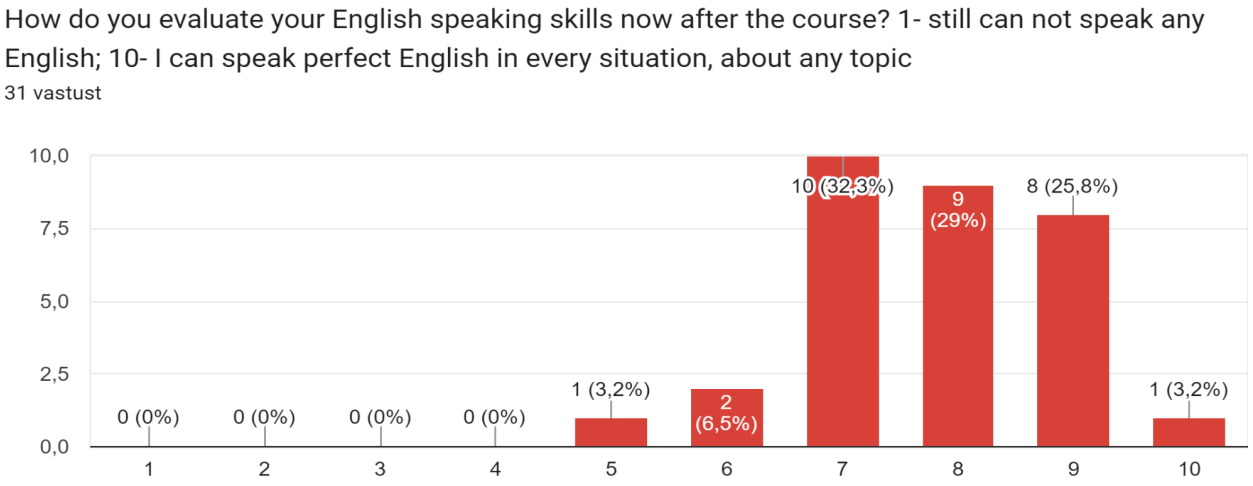

Figure 3. Students' evaluation of their speaking skills after the course on the scale of 1 to 10

The questions about willingness to communicate in English with classmates and the English teacher had similar results. The average score of WTC before the speaking course was 6.32 on a scale from 1 to 10, with number 1 showing no willingness at all and 10 expressing maximum willingness. Only one student answered 2, two students answered 3, and on the other side of the scale were two students, who answered 9 and and eight students who answered 8. After the six weeks of speaking lessons, the students' perceived WTC had increased to an average of 7.54, with two students answering 3 and six students answering 10. No students answered less than three, most of the scores being 10, 8 and 7. The scores given by the students, estimating their WTC in English before and after the course, with the overall rise in their WTC are shown in Figure 4.

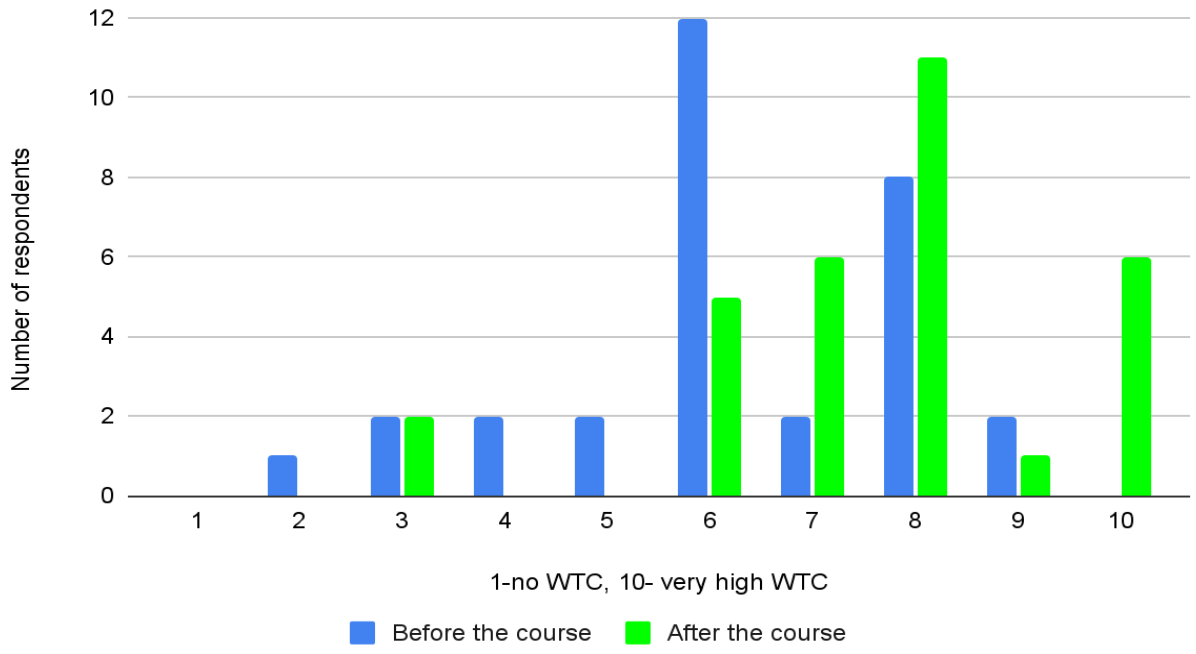

Figure 4. Students' perceived willingness to communicate before and after the speaking course

According to the individual answers, nine students remained on the same level of WTC, two from them on level 3 (quite low willingness), the rest on 4, 6 and 8. 18 students claimed their

willingness increased by one point, for three students by two points. One student evaluated her rise of WTC by three points, from 4 to 7; and one student by five points, from 5 to 10. Altogether 65% of the students felt that their WTC increased during the course, which is a significant result for just 30 contact lessons. However, two students expressed the feeling of their WTC having lowered by one point, from 8 to 7, during the speaking course, although in open-ended questions these students claim that they did enjoy the activities, and their perceived speaking competence rose by one or two points (from 5/6 to 7). It can only be assumed from the other answers of these students (one of them has pointed out that sometimes she does not have any motivation to talk to others and also that she does not like to do anything in front of the class, the other has commented that everything was good and she liked the activities), that these students might be more introverted and extensive speaking was too much for them, or that they felt their incompetence in some subjects, or that they did not feel comfortable with the group or the teacher.

The open question of "What did you like about the speaking activities?" had a variety of answers, with cooperating with classmates and having different activities than usual language classes being prevalent, and having fun in class also mentioned several times. Figure 5 brings out all the answers in their original format:

I liked that it was fun and did a lot of different things what we haven't done before in a english class.
Less trying to remember a bunch of different rules and more speaking
I liked the games and speaking with my friends.
I liked that the lessons were fun and there was no pressure that my speaking skills are going to be graded.
games and group work
we did not have to write ;)
I liked the group assignments and how different and fun this course was.
I liked that the teacher is friendly and I was not so scared to speak
the games and talking to my classmates. Videos also
It wasn't boring and the activities were really fun
I liked that we did the CAE listening exercises, it was a new experience because i didn't do the English exam on the 9th grade, but now i have an idea of what's to come in the 12th grade. I also really liked the group discussions and games.
I got more comfortable with speaking.

That we had very different exercises, we never did something that we have done before
I liked the games and active learning like standing up and speaking with others.
That it was different from what we usually do. I really like speaking and feel comfortable so it was very fun.
I loved that there were so many different activities and the games were fun
I liked that I could talk about things I wanted to
The games and communicating with a group
I learned a lot
They were fun, I got little more confident thanks to that.
The little games with alias
I liked the games that we played and the CAE speaking test
Sometimes it's fun, But sometimes there is no motivation to communicate with others
I liked that we didn't just read and write worksheets like in other lessons
Everything
Group activities and different ways to study
I liked talking in pairs
It wasn't as scary as I thought it would be. It was fun :)
That I can speak with my deskmates and classmates too (not only a teacher)

Figure 5. Students' answers to the question "What did you like about the speaking activities?"

30 students answered that they liked the group assignments in class and one student answered "depending on the topic". No negative answers were given to group-work, so it can be said that students generally like cooperative learning in groups, like previous research also shows.

Figure 6 shows the preferred activities of the students during the speaking course. 24 students found getting to know and trying out the CAE exam speaking activities beneficial, one student also gave justification to that, and it probably reflects most of the group, the students did not know much about the CAE exam, but during the course they got a good idea of what to expect and how the tasks are carried out. The fact that they could try them out in small groups gave them an understanding of their abilities, and where they still need to improve.

17 people equally said choosing their own topic to speak for monologues and interviewing classmates were the most beneficial tasks for them. Getting the chance to

practise monologue with an easy topic, and as a result feeling competent and able to speak for one to two minutes continuously, is encouraging and motivating for students. Interviewing classmates gives students a chance to talk to all co-learners in class, and getting to know the peers better creates a supportive and safe environment to speak.

16 people chose class debate and short games in the beginning of the lessons as the most beneficial tasks. The latter is a supportive measure for creating a good and active atmosphere for the upcoming classes, and class debate was a new experience for the students as none of the students had participated in debates before. All of the other tasks listed in the questionnaire also had a fair number of supporters, 7-15 students each, so it can be concluded, as Kass (2020) has also found in her research, different learners prefer different activities and teachers need to vary the activities to meet all learners' needs. In the compiled course there seem to be no activities that are inappropriate or too difficult for the learners. The open option of naming other activities got one answer, but no specification, so no conclusions can be drawn from there.

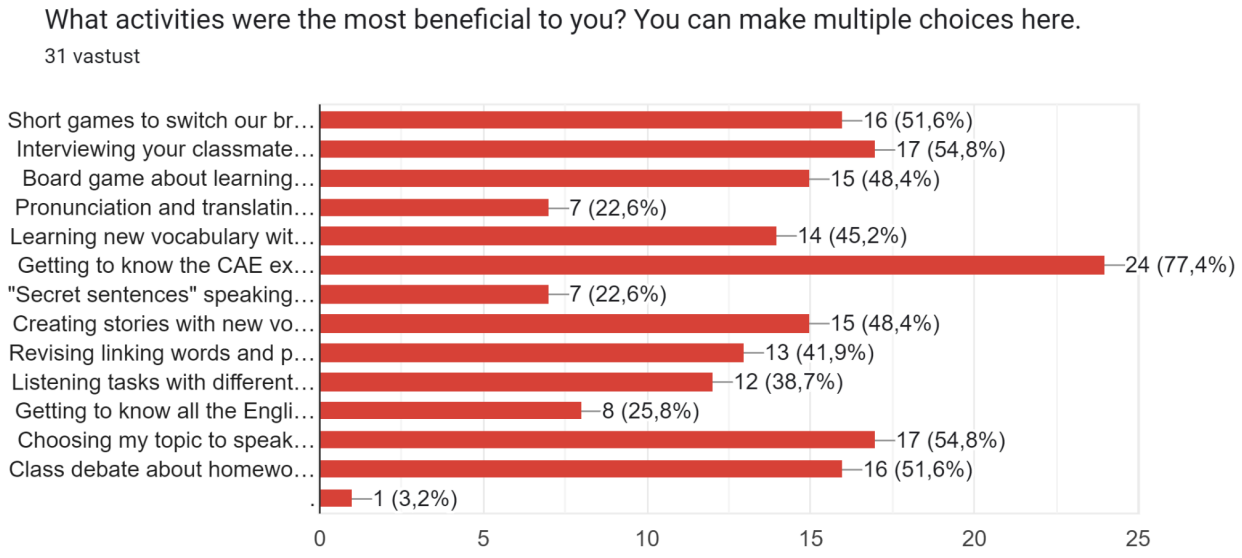

Figure 6. What activities were the most beneficial to you?

The question “Were there any activities you disliked?” got 20 negative answers. The 11 remaining students mentioned several activities, but there were no prevailing activities that many students disliked. Two students pointed out they did not enjoy speaking in front of the class (a few tasks required that) and two students mentioned the debate, most likely because the groups were too big, seven to eight people in a group, and not everyone was active during the big group discussions, some people dominated others and one of the group leaders was being overly self-centred and careless of what the others were saying. In the future these cases can be avoided by the teacher stepping in and guiding the self-made leader of the group into asking for the opinions of all the students in the group.

An additional question of how much anxiety or fear the students experienced in the speaking classes, was asked. The answers were given on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that the student felt totally relaxed and 10 meaning that the student was very scared and would rather not speak at all. The average score was 4.5, the first group answered 1-4 and the second group 1-8, so the difference was greater in the learners with lower level English skills. In the first group there were four students and in the second group only one student who felt totally relaxed (answered 1). The score gives an overview of the levels of speaking anxiety in the groups and indicates that the first group felt more relaxed than the other, but as an average the students level of anxiety was quite low during the course. No implication in the change in the level before and after the course can be made.

To the question “Do you feel that improvisational speaking activities, where there are no right or wrong answers, that are done in cooperation with fellow students and in a supportive and friendly atmosphere in class, increase your motivation and WTC in English?” 25 students answered ‘Yes’ and six answered ‘No’. Overall, 80.6% of the students felt that open-ended cooperative tasks had a positive impact on their motivation and WTC in English. For the remaining 19.4% the reasons why they did not feel these tasks motivational or

encouraging are difficult to draw from their answers. In some cases, they already had high WTC and motivation that might have been difficult to increase, and some students might need more time or smaller groups, or different kinds of topics and tasks to feel the changes in their WTC and motivation.

All 31 students agreed that open-ended speaking tasks should be a part of the English lessons in gymnasium and listed several positive sides to them. Figure 7 shows all the justification in their original format:

Yes, there should be because it made learning english easier.
I do because I think it is a great way to improve your English speaking skills
Yes, because you get more confidence to speak and also your mind turns more creative by doing these improvisational activities.
Yes, because it's fun and improves your speaking skills.
Yes, because talking is the most important part of learning foreign language.
I think these activities and games should be part of English lessons in gymnasium because they help with the fear of speaking and these are a great way to socialize more with your classmates.
I think that we should do it more often because we write and listen too much
yes, it helps to speak more and also to have fun
Yes, because the games and improvisational speaking activities wake up the brain, especially when the lessons are in the morning and other subjects in gymnasium are already boring and English should be the one subject that is different and fun.
Yes, I do. In my opinion understanding and speaking English is the most important part of learning a language and in this course i was a lot more willing to speak English freely
Yes because you get more comfortable with others.
Yes and i also think that it should be in elementary school and other levels as well, because i and i think that most students will agree with me that it is a lot easier and more fun than just writing stuff down and listening
Yes, because if learning is fun students want to do it more.
Yes because it's different and new. It can be useful for the future when you have to speak with other english speakers
For sure
Yes cause it would encourage most students to talk then
Definitely, because they are really useful
They should, it can make studying fun and interesting
Yes. It's easier to memorise vocabulary and it's fun
Yes, bc they help to feel confident
Yes, it's a good way to get better at speaking
I think that's a good way to learn

yes it's important because then we would learn more
I think yes, these were very interesting and fun to do.
Yes because it develops thinking on the fly
Yes it should be part of English lessons
Yes I think so
Yes!

Figure 7. Students' justifications of why open speaking activities should be a part of learning English in gymnasium

The prevailing sentiment for more than half of the study group was that these activities helped them feel more confident in speaking and motivated them to learn English.

The feedback shows that most of the students considered the short warm-up activities very engaging, fun and useful for switching their brains to English, as during the school-days students have four to five different subjects to focus on, and switching between maths, chemistry, history and different languages can sometimes be challenging. On the contrary, one student responded that the short warm-up activities were the only activities of the course that he disliked.

The final question was an open question of anything else they would like to add for feedback and a few students took the opportunity. One student commented: "It was a fun class and the fact that we didn't get graded was very encouraging, so there wasn't any pressure if you messed up". The other student stressed that she really enjoyed the course and one student stated: "I liked to come to English classes". It can be concluded that less grading and assessing is one of the components of enjoyable learning.

To summarise the answers given, it could be said that students prefer open-ended cooperative speaking tasks that stimulate their thinking process, provide challenges (are not too easy), and offer opportunities to get to know their classmates better. The tasks covered a

broad range of topics, which can also increase students' vocabulary, grammar usage and general language fluency.

2.6 Discussion and Reflection of the Action Research

The action research identified the problem of Estonian students' EFL speaking apprehension and the problems with it in an upper secondary school. It was motivated by the problems the author and the other teachers have noticed in a great number of students, who have low willingness to communicate in English and due to the lack of experience and regular practice, also low confidence in oral production. In addition, a great number of students in school experience the fear of making mistakes that hinders their oral EFL production as well.

A task-based speaking course with mostly open tasks was created and implemented together with a supportive and encouraging learning environment. Information of the impact of the course was gathered with a questionnaire filled out at the end of the 30 lessons of the course. The results show an increase in students perceived willingness to communicate and competence in speaking English and that validates the arguments of the researchers (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011; Guilloteaux and Dörnyei, 2008, Hendra and Jones, 2018) that supportive environment and focusing on interesting, immersive open tasks helps learners to start speaking more. Further and longer research is needed to find out if the increased willingness and confidence persists after this course and continues with other teachers that use different methods of teaching English.

Ur (1991) identified four characteristics of successful speaking tasks, and with most of the tasks of the course, these were achieved - learners talked a lot, all students contributed to the group and pair tasks, motivation to attend English classes and take part in activities was high and they tried to speak English according to their best abilities, learning from and supporting each other, asking for words they did not remember, etc.

Students did enjoy the tasks where the immersive aspects of the task were present and they focused on completing the task rather than the language form they were using, like Ellis et al (2020) have identified as good language tasks. During some tasks a few students felt that competing with each other, especially in the group with somewhat stronger language skills, keeps the motivation high, it is challenging to be better or complete a task faster, and it can be accepted that sometimes on that level competitive tasks support engagement and immersion in the tasks.

All the tasks compiled and described in Appendix 1 can be used by English teachers in EFL lessons to complement other activities in class, or as a speaking course to improve students' speaking skills. Notes of the observations made with the two test-groups are written in Appendix 1, so teachers can already take these into consideration when working with their specific language learners.

Task-based Language Teaching with the focus on task performance rather than language forms, has proven effective in teaching speaking skills, learners get a lot of exposure to different authentic situations in life and together with foreign language skills, also obtain cooperation, communication and decision-making skills, that the society and modern pedagogy expect. Open tasks in a supportive learning environment have proven to have a positive effect on students' willingness and courage to communicate, creativity, fluency and intrinsic motivation to learn English, which in the longer perspective prepare them well for their future life (Zondag et al, 2020).

Future action involves continuing teaching oral skills to year 10 students with the compiled tasks, open tasks are interesting for the students as well as the teacher, as the outcomes of the tasks depend on the specific students and can not be predicted, every lesson is unique.

Future research should analyse the students over a longer period of time, to understand if the good results of one course are persistent and long-term.

CONCLUSION

The thesis investigated the development of students' perceived oral skills and willingness to communicate in EFL classes of year 10 students within the context of an Estonian state gymnasium. The aim of the action research was to find out what effect will an EFL speaking course with mostly open-ended and cooperative tasks in a supportive learning environment have on students' willingness to communicate and their perceived competence in speaking English.

The study consisted of compiling a task-based speaking course with 30 45-minute lessons, mostly in double-lessons of 90 minutes, suitable for year 10 EFL students, and trying it out with two groups, altogether 33 students. The students filled a questionnaire at the end of the course about their perceived WTC and their confidence in speaking, as well as the feedback to the tasks. The results show that for the majority of students, the task-based speaking course increased their WTC and perceived competence in English. Although the time of the course was short, only 6 weeks, 80.6% of the students felt that their confidence and willingness to communicate with their peers and the English teacher was increased during the course. The average score of WTC was risen from 6.32 to 7.54 on a scale of 1-10, with 6 students out of 31 reaching the maximum level (10) of WTC. The students enjoyed the communicative tasks, getting to know their classmates better and learning from each other. However, it has to be taken into consideration that the research data is subjective and further research has to be made to make generalisations.

An additional value of the compiled speaking course is that most of the tasks require minimal equipment, no computer or screen and can be held outside, with the weather allowing. This is in accordance with the Estonian initiative Schools in Motion, that promotes more movement during the long school-days of upper secondary school students, and has proven beneficial to students' learning outcomes.

The findings of this research contribute to the ongoing discourse on language education and offer practical insights and tasks to use for EFL teachers. As English proficiency becomes increasingly essential in the globalised world, understanding and addressing the specific challenges faced by students in Estonian high schools contributes to more effective language teaching practices and, consequently, also students' higher WTC in English. Learners of a language need to have regular opportunities to practise oral interaction in a supportive and engaging environment in order to gain confidence in communicating. Teachers can use the materials of the compiled taks-based speaking course according to their needs and wishes, adjusting the topics and the tasks to their students, all of the tasks can be done individually, they are not interconnected and do not have to be done as a full course.

The author has answered the research question with a positive outcome, and found out that task-based teaching is engaging and beneficial for year 10 students, and is convinced that open tasks in a supportive learning environment have an increasing effect on most students' willingness and courage to communicate, creativity, fluency and intrinsic motivation to learn English. This in turn feeds students' motivation and engagement in the English studies and consequently brings them to their ultimate goal of becoming competent speakers of the English language.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Collection of Tasks suitable for year 10 students

List of the tasks:

Getting to know

1. A Story of Your Name
2. Find Someone Who
3. I Am Special Because
4. Two Truths and a Lie
5. Tell Me Three Things About Your Neighbour / New Friend

Warm-ups

6. Who Am I?
7. Synonyms-Antonyms
8. Yes, but.. Yes, and..
9. What Am I Thinking About?
10. Picture in a Story
11. Give Away Your New Words
12. Change Places
13. Associations
14. Riddles
15. Video/Picture Guessing

Main speaking tasks

1. Survey in Class
2. Expert Interviews
3. Finding Solutions
4. Top Ten
5. One-Minute Speech - Basic and Competitive versions
6. My Life As A…
7. Dreams

8. Describe a Picture and Draw
9. Agree and Disagree Corners
10. Scales
11. Contrasting
12. Excuses
13. Nonsense Word Definitions
14. Stories/Alphabet Stories
15. A Story With the Same First Sentence
16. Why? Because
17. Advertising
18. My Perfect Future
19. Job-Interview
20. Role-Play
21. Debate

Controversial topics for discussion

Instructions

Getting to know

1. A Story of Your Name

This is a suitable task if the students do not know each other and come from different cultures. Students need to tell the others where they got their name and if it means anything.

2. Find Someone Who

Skills in focus Asking questions, getting to know each other

Preparations Bingo-sheets with questions for each student and teacher

Instructions Each student gets an A5 sheet of paper with 15 squares. Each square has a character trait or an informative question in it. The questions can vary according to the students or what they are interested in/how much they know each other. The students take their pens and start going around asking questions from classmates. They can fill the square with the name of the person who matches the information, each name can only be in one square. The student who finishes first is the winner. It can be carried out without the winning

component - just go around and ask questions until you get all your squares filled, then stand in the circle and check the answers.

VARIATION

With a big group (more than 20 people) the adjustment can be to find as many people as possible whose name can be written in one square. Afterwards, the group stands in a circle and everyone reads one question and the name of the person they found to be written there. The teacher asks the group - did you get someone else in there as well? Who else feels their name could be written there?

Example:

FIND SOMEONE WHO…

has lived in another country for more than 10 days	has a pet	likes to learn English	earned money this summer	has broken a bone
doesn't like chocolate	loves to dance	has the same birth-month as you	is left-handed	has never seen a Harry Potter film
would like to go to a youth exchange	has more than one sibling	has travelled to at least 3 other countries	likes to spend time outside	likes reading

3. I Am Special Because

Skills in focus Speaking about yourself, things that you are special for. Finding similarities and differences with others

Preparations Put chairs in a circle, one for each student

Instructions Students have to say something that they have done or have never done that makes them special. Everyone, who has done that or feels the same, will sit on the next chair, on the neighbour's lap if the neighbour is not moving. Only the ones who sit at the top can move. The game ends when one of the students has got back to his/her starting seat in the circle.

4. Two Truths and a Lie

Skills in focus Giving interesting information about yourself, getting to know others, guessing

Preparations Small pieces of paper and a pen for every student

Instructions The teacher and the students have to write down three facts about themselves: two of these should be true and one false. In turn, everyone tells their facts, others can ask additional questions and have to guess which one is a lie.

VARIATION

It can be played as a team game: two truths and a lie about this team of three, the other teams have to guess which one is a lie.

5. Tell Me Three Things About Your Neighbour

Skills in focus Asking questions, noticing and remembering facts about other students, getting to know each other

Preparations No preparation is needed

Instructions Students tell each other in pairs (or to the whole class if comfortable enough) facts about their lives/their holidays/previous week at school. Afterwards, the teacher asks students to tell three things about their neighbour. Optional - give a point for each correct answer and deduct for a false answer.

Warm-ups

6. Who Am I?

Skills in focus Asking yes-or-no questions, guessing

Preparation Bring Post-it notes

Instructions Every student gets one Post-it note and writes the name of an animal/famous person on it and sticks it on the forehead of another student. Students have to go around and ask each other yes-or-no questions to find out who they are. When they get a "no" to their answer, they have to move on and find someone else to ask from. In the end, when some students are stuck and have not been able to guess their character, everyone can give hints until they find out who they are.

7. Synonyms-Antonyms

Skills in focus Repeating words learned recently, finding similar words, guessing synonyms-antonyms for familiar words

Preparation Prepare word cards with synonyms or antonyms to words you have been learning in class

Instructions Draw a card and find your partner for today's speaking lesson according to the meaning of the word: a synonym, or an antonym. Students go around without showing their cards and ask each other about the words they have. Giving them more advanced, not familiar synonyms or antonyms on the cards makes the task more challenging, they have to guess or find someone in the group that knows their word.

8. Yes, but.. Yes, and..

Skills in focus Buying tickets, asking and answering questions, positive thinking, creativity

Preparations No preparation

Instructions Divide students in pairs. One of them is a tourist wanting to buy a ticket (to wherever they like) and the other is the ticket officer. 1. round - the ticket officer has to say "Yes, but.." to all the questions, and think of something to include in the answer. After the first round, the teacher asks "Who got the ticket and what happened?" and students share. 2. round - change roles and the ticket officer now has to say "Yes, and…" The teacher asks: "Who got the ticket now and did you get anything in addition?"

Conclusion and follow-up by the teacher: "Remember to always be positive and find solutions! One little word can change a lot!"

9. What Am I Thinking About?

Skills in focus Asking questions, getting to know each other

Preparations No preparation

Instructions This can be done in pairs or trios. One of the students has to think about an object (in class). The partner (or two) start asking yes-or-no questions to get to know what the object is. Students take turns in guessing.

10. Picture in a Story

Skills in focus Creativity, story-telling, monologue

Preparations Bring Alias cards or any other cards with objects on them

Instructions This task is best done in groups of 3-4. Students draw an Alias card one by one and tell others about their holidays, including the thing in the picture in the story secretly. The others have to guess what the picture on the card is.

11. Give Away Your New Words

Skills in focus Learning new vocabulary, asking questions

Preparations Bring paper-slips

Instructions Students find new words from a text they read or video they watch, for example poem "The Chaos" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1edPxKqiptw Write 3 of them on separate paper-slips and write translations on the other side. The task is to give away all your paper-slips, but you can only do so by asking other students if they know what the word means and if they don't, you can give the slip to her/him and show the translation.

Note: Some students were very active and gave away their words very fast - do not let them sit down and declare them winners - other students can ask about their words and give them new words, so the game continues until all the students in the class know all the words on the paper-slips or until your lesson finishes.

12. Change places

Skills in focus Getting to know each other, finding similarities

Preparations Put chairs in a circle; or stones/pieces of paper/old newspapers to mark the places to stand on when you are outside. There should be one place less than the number of students.

Instructions One student stands in the middle, the others are sitting on chairs/standing in their places. The student in the middle says something about her/himself and everyone who has the same/feels the same/did the same yesterday needs to change places. The one in the middle tries to get someone's place during the switching and another student is left in the middle. It is not allowed to sit or stand right next to the place you were.

Can be played with grammar practising purposes, saying something in the past tense (yesterday, during holidays), future (dreams) etc.

VARIATION

When you do not have a lot of space in class - a student stands up and says something he/she likes/did during the holidays or is dreaming of, and everyone that likes the same thing/did the same/have the same dream, has to stand up. When everyone is seated again, the next student says something about him/herself.

13. Associations

Skills in focus Fluency, quick thinking

Preparations No preparation

Instructions Students stand in a circle with the teacher. Someone starts with saying a word, the next student has to say a word, as fast as possible, that associates with the previous word. The next person says a word that is associated with the previous word. No words are wrong, whatever comes to your mind is good, but you should not repeat any words that have already been said. It is a good activity to start with a group of not-so-talkative or shy students. Can also be played in pairs/trios.

14. Riddles

Skills in focus Guessing, discussing together

Preparations Find riddles that are enough challenging for your students

Instructions Let the students discuss in small groups in English what the answer could be, sometimes there are several correct answers. Outside, you can give them one riddle to guess and move further. When one group has the answer, they come to you and say it so that the others do not hear it. When it is correct, you give them the next one to solve. This way faster thinkers can solve more riddles in a given time and the others can take time in thinking at their own pace.

Examples: “There are 3 coals, a carrot and a hat lying on the grass - what happened? (a snowman has melted) / If you have it, you don’t share it, if you share it, you don’t have it (a secret), etc”

Riddles for high-school students can be found at https://www.weareteachers.com/riddles-for-high-school-students/ or https://www.rd.com/list/riddles-for-teens/

15. Video/Picture Guessing

Skills in focus Describing pictures or actions, guessing

Preparations Find short videos/pictures of activities or people working on special things

Instructions A student sits with her back to the screen and the others describe in two minutes what is happening (for example a certain type of sport or hobby, working with specific tools, etc) and she has to guess what it is that they are seeing. In the end, he/she can say what information was missing for her to be able to guess (he/she can not ask questions during the explanation).

Open-ended speaking tasks

1. SURVEY IN CLASS

Skills in focus Asking questions, collecting information

Preparation Prepare paper slips and a pen for each student

Instructions Students have to make up two to five questions on a certain topic and ask everyone in class. After asking they have to make a table/chart/overview of the findings (can be done in Google Forms if computers are available).

VARIATION

All students are given a paper slip and asked to write one question that they would like to ask their classmates, have wanted to know about the others, but have been too shy to ask. The teacher puts in a question she would like to know also. At the beginning of the speaking course for example how comfortable they feel speaking English with their classmates, on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being ‘not comfortable at all’ and 10 being ‘totally comfortable’. The paper slips are folded and put in a basket or little textile bag. The students are then asked to draw a question for making a survey in class (it can be their question or someone else’s, the tension is taken off by no one knowing which question is written by whom). Students have to go to every student in class and ask the question they got from the basket and when they have done that, make a little overview of the findings to the class. Students are advised to write notes about the answers on the other side of their paper slip, where they have the question. Students are given a little extra time to prepare the overview. In this survey, especially when it is done at the very beginning of the course, it is good that the teacher also takes part, draws a question and does the survey together with the students - it is an excellent opportunity to get

to know the students, their speaking abilities and -confidence. When the answers are collected, the teacher can be the first one and give an example of how she expects the students to present the results (tell the number or percentage of students who said this/ are thinking so and also make a conclusion - the majority of people in this class do that etc).

2. EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Skills in focus Asking questions, interviewing

Preparations Bring paper-slips

Instructions Let students create a list of 'expert' topics. Let them have fun with creating them, asking what kind of strange experts they would like to invite in the classroom, every student writes one on the paper-slip, folds it and puts it in a basket/bag.

Examples: a school-lunch expert, a save-the-frogs expert, the pizza-tasting specialist, an embarrassment expert, a birthday-party specialist, an expert in teaching English, etc.

Pair students up. One of the students is the expert and the other is the interviewer. The interviewer draws the expert's topic from the basket and starts asking questions from the expert. After the first interview they can change roles and make another interview with another ‘expert’. Their opening question or introduction lets the expert know his/her area of expertise.

This can be done with many pairs working simultaneously as well as one pair at a time with the remainder of the group as the audience. The benefit of everybody working simultaneously is that it can break down excessive shyness and create engaging conversations. While the benefits of speaking one pair at a time is everybody witnessing the process and learning from it.

Example opening:

“We are extremely fortunate today to have with us in the studio Mr John Smith. John is a well known, respected and published expert on the benefits of teaching children to read underwater. John, I'd like to begin by asking, when did you first realise your vocation?”

The task ends when the interviewer brings it to a close.

The goal for the expert is to 'live' into their expertise realistically and wholeheartedly, regardless of how ridiculous the topic is or how little knowledge they have on the subject. The goal for the interviewer is to draw out the expert by asking open-ended questions. Teacher may need to demonstrate these before to avoid the frustration of simple "yes-no" or one-word answers.

3. FINDING SOLUTIONS

Skills in focus Discussion, analysing, finding solutions

Preparations Decide on the topic and prepare a material about it

Instructions In groups of three to five, students read a newspaper article or watch a video with the whole class on a problematic topic (climate, pollution, consumerism, etc)

Examples:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7i0QMnz4ExY

https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/05/china/2023-hottest-year-china-climate-intl-hnk/index.html

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECkLgq2W9RU

Their task is to analyse the news, discuss in the groups the roots of the problem, and try to find at least 5 things to do to fix the problem / what could be the solutions, what can we do? Present the problem and the possible solutions to the class.

Note: For advanced speakers give a larger number of solutions to find, as the first ones are usually the easy ones - recycle, use less and they finish discussing too soon.

4. TOP TEN

Skills in focus Discussion, agreeing-disagreeing

Preparations Find a top ten list of an interesting topic

Instructions Choose a topic and let students make a “top ten” list on it. Then open the real top ten “official list” on Google and give points to students for all the right answers (Top Ten things that the UK is famous for/ Top Ten things to do in Viljandi or Estonia/Top Ten things that people regret later in life). Discussion - why are some things that the students find important missing from the official list; what can we learn and remember from the list?

Example: Top Ten things people regret later in life https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/regrets-10-common-people-have-later-life-robin-r/

5. ONE-MINUTE SPEECH - BASIC

Skills in focus Practising monologue, timed speaking

Preparations No preparation

Instructions Students need to think about and write a topic on which they’d like to talk about. Examples: travel, school, lessons, poetry, growing vegetables, documentaries, books, pop stars, computers, food, cars, etc.

Divide students into groups of three to four and ask one of them to be the timekeeper. Everyone in the group has to speak for one minute uninterruptedly (monologue), after that the listeners can ask questions on the topic.

Note: For the weaker group it was challenging to speak even on their self-chosen topics for one minute, for the more advanced group it was too easy, they would enjoy the advanced or competitive version more.

ADVANCED VERSION

All the topics that students chose are put together in an open container face down. The timekeeper names a student to begin. The student chooses a piece of paper from the container. Once they have read the topic they give the topic paper to the timekeeper who says: “You have one minute on … (name of subject on paper) starting from now” and the monologue begins. The goal for the speaker is to fill the minute.

COMPETITIVE VERSION

If the students are competitive, engagement in the task can be enhanced with a speech-competition. Divide all learners into two teams and give them a speaking order i.e. Speaker 1, Speaker 2, and so on. Nominate a team to start. Speaker 1 takes a topic, the stopwatch is started.

The opposing team listens hard for opportunities to take over the speech.

They can do it when the speaker *deviates*, *hesitates* or *repeats* himself. To take over, they must call the challenge. The timekeeper stops the watch and judges whether or not taking over is fair (the challenger explains - deviation, hesitation or repetition noticed). If it is, the challenger takes over, the stopwatch is set again for the remaining time and now the starting speaker's team may challenge. If the challenge is unsuccessful, the original speaker continues. The goal for the speaker is to survive the minute. If they do so, they get ten points. If they don't, whichever team is speaking last gets 5 points. A full game is played so that all the speakers from either side have spoken.

Note: The competitive game is only suitable for confident speakers who like challenges. This game adapts well to specific subject areas. Set up a theme and make all your topics sub-themes. Example: Transport: cars, buses, trains, planes, bicycles, public transport, cars in the future, petrol costs, environmental concerns, car fashions, etc.

6. MONOLOGUE - MY LIFE AS A …

Skills in focus Practising monologue, creativity

Preparations Bring pieces of paper

Instructions Have students write names of objects on pieces of paper at the beginning of the lesson and put them in a container, for example a door hinge, the president, a teddy bear, a park bench... Students pick them one by one and have to give a one-two minute speech on how it feels to be a …, highlights, hardships, etc.

It can be finished by choosing the best monologue at the end of the class.

7. DREAMS

Skills in focus Practising monologue, asking questions, making positive comments, being critical

Preparations No preparations

Instructions Let students make a 2-minute presentation about something they dream about/an organisation or event they would like to create one day (it can be imaginary, not real if the students are not very self-confident). The listeners are divided into three teams: the first team has to ask questions about the topic; the second team has to make a positive comment about the presentation and the topic, encourage and the third team has to doubt/be critical. Then roles are changed.

8. DESCRIBE A PICTURE AND DRAW

Skills in focus Describing pictures in detail, understanding each other

Preparations Bring pictures that have a lot of details and white paper

Instructions Divide students in pairs, give one of them a picture and ask not to show it to the partner. The pictures can be more abstract or simple, depending on the students. The students with the picture have to explain the picture in detail to their partner, who has to draw the picture on the paper. When finished, pictures are compared, and students discuss the similarities and differences. The other student gets a picture now and starts to describe it.

Note: Abstract Dixit play cards worked well, the students enjoyed the task and asked for more pictures to describe and draw.

9. AGREE AND DISAGREE CORNERS

Skills in focus Agreeing and disagreeing, expressing opinion

Preparations Prepare about 10 questions on controversial topics as statements to agree or disagree with.

Instructions Appoint a corner of the room or a special place for agreeing and an opposite corner/a place for disagreeing. Ask students to stand up and choose a side after your question and explain why they think so. They can also stand in the middle.

Before the task you may practise language of opinion, agreement, disagreement if needed. Asking for an opinion: What are your thoughts on this? How do you feel about that? What's your opinion? Why did you choose this place? Do you agree? Do you have anything to say about this?

Expressing opinion: In my opinion; the way I see it; I feel; if you ask me; if you want my honest opinion; as far as I'm concerned.

Agreeing: I agree with you 100 percent; I couldn't agree with you more; that's so true; You're absolutely right; that's exactly how I feel; no doubt about it; I suppose so; I was just going to say that; You have a point there.

Disagreeing - I'm afraid I disagree (with you); I totally disagree; I don't think so; I'm afraid I agree with him/her more; I'd say the exact opposite; not necessarily; that's not always the case; no, I'm not sure about that;

Polite interruptions - Can I add something here? Is it ok if I jump in for a second? If I might add something; can I throw my two cents in? Sorry to interrupt, but..;

After accidentally interrupting someone - Sorry, you were saying..; go ahead..

After being interrupted - You didn't let me finish; can I finish my sentence?

10. SCALES

Skills in focus Agreeing and disagreeing, expressing opinion, giving feedback

Preparations Make up about 10 questions with options to choose from on a scale of 1-10

Instructions A similar task to Agree and Disagree corners, with some more variation. All students listen to the question and choose their place on the scale (10-absolutely love it/totally agree, 1-don't like at all/totally disagree). Everyone remains in their place and the teacher makes mini-interviews on why they chose these places.

Can be done after reading an article/book/interview, to check comprehension or attitudes towards a certain topic, or at the end or beginning of an event/course for getting to know the prior knowledge or preconception and evaluation or getting feedback, etc.

11. CONTRASTING

Skills in focus Asking questions, getting to know each other

Preparations Bring Alias card or small pictures of different objects

Instructions Divide students into groups of four and have them sitting around a table / standing up, facing each other. Put a stack of pictures/Alias playing-cards with pictures in the middle of the students, facing the table/ground. Let the first student reveal the first picture, saying an adjective and naming the object on it. The next student has to compare the object on the next picture that he/she takes from the pile with the first one, and say how that object is better/bigger/stronger/softer/whiter, etc than the other. Contrasting continues in turns until all the pictures are revealed.

Note: The more advanced students really enjoyed this task, had fun and found creative ways to compare and contrast the pictures; the weaker group used simple vocabulary and were more serious during the task.

12. EXCUSES

Skills in focus Creativity, reasoning

Preparations No preparation

Instructions A short task for when by the end of the lesson students become restless or tired and would like to finish the class earlier - everyone has to come up with a good excuse why they should leave class earlier. The teacher listens to all of the excuses and makes a decision according to them/can choose the best/funniest/most innovative excuse..

Note: This task woke up the students who seemed to be tired, they got all excited.

13. NONSENSE WORD DEFINITION

Skills in focus Creativity, explaining, reasoning

Preparations Bring pieces of paper

Instructions Each student is given one to two pieces of paper and asked to make up new words in English. The students put the words in a basket and then draw one or hand their word straight to their neighbour on their right. Their task is to provide a plausible definition for the word. To encourage inventiveness and creativity ask for the history of the word and its

country of origin, whether it is a noun, verb, adjective etc, what it means and an example of it in use. Examples of nonsense words: zoppet, tenplinth, oxypottle, minostun, appitzeen, klintsplot, baddle, closky, shint, wud, miggit…

Example definition: “The word I've received is "baddle" and here is my definition: This is a variation of the word "battle" which is another name for a fight, conflict, clash or struggle. An example of current usage is: He was injured on the baddle field and stretchered out. Baddle is also a verb. For example: We baddled it out for first place in the basketball competition. The variation, substituting the double letters of t for d, was adopted because people consistently failed to pronounce the two t-s clearly. The d-form of the word became acceptable.”

14. STORY CIRCLES OR ALPHABET STORIES

Skills in focus Creativity, storytelling, listening to each other

Preparations No preparation

Instructions Stand in the circle with all the people in the class. The first person starts by saying a word/sentence that starts with A, the next continues with B. If groups are bigger than 10 people, divide them into groups to keep the story going relatively fast so no one gets bored waiting for their turn.

VARIATIONS

Creating a story together without the alphabet, start by saying a word/phrase/sentence, all the others follow the same pattern and a story is created. The story can be concluded with the sentence “From this story we learned, that …”

Different variations of creating the story with a group are:

A word at a time

Aim for a complete story: opening, middle and end in 4 rounds. Each person adds one word at a time. Members have to help each other by making sure their word choices keep the story moving toward the desired goal.

Two words at a time

Each player add two words before handing the story on.

A sentence at a time

Each player adds a sentence (starting with the next letter/the last letter of the last word the previous student said).

Add genre

The story can have a genre - a fairytale, a ghost story, a love story, an action-packed adventure, a western, a youth novel etc...

Add in the style

The story must be told in the style of a rap, a sports commentary, a news reader, a comedian, etc.

Include the word "interlocutor/riveting/futile, etc" three times (any word you would like your students to remember

The story must not include any words with the letter 'O/B/C' in them

Insert the letter of your choice, but do not make it too hard - E or A are really difficult to get around.

15. A STORY WITH THE FIRST SENTENCE GIVEN

Skills in focus Creativity, storytelling, cooperation

Preparations No preparation

Instructions Divide students in pairs. Have them create a story using the new vocabulary/grammar item and linking words and phrases. When ready, they tell the story to the class.

Example of the first sentence: "She was a shrewd student, but this time it did not quite go as planned..."

Note: The stories that the students created and read to the class were very creative, mostly with criminal or tragic plots. Students liked the task.

16. WHY? BECAUSE

Skills in focus Asking questions, cooperation

Preparations Bring pieces of paper

Instructions Give each student two pieces of paper. On one card, they should write a question that begins with the word 'why'. On the second piece, they write the answer to the question starting with the word 'because'. Then collect all the why's in one pile and all the becauses in another. Mix up each pile and then let students come to the piles, choose one from "why?" and one "because" and read them out loud. The combinations can be very funny! After reading the random match-ups the teacher can let the students match the correct answers

with the correct questions, with each student getting one “why?” and one “because” and asking the others to find the “because” to their “why” or vice versa.

17. ADVERTISING

Skills in focus Creativity, cooperation

Preparations No preparation

Instructions This task is good for developing small-group confidence, creativity and trust. Firstly, elicit some ideas for innovative products or services from the students on small pieces of paper.

Examples: Kits of Eternal Sunshine, Snow Kits for Sunny Places, Instant Fame Services, etc.

Split your students into groups of three to five and let them choose a paper with a product they will represent. Tell them they have approx. 20 minutes to put together an advertisement. All members of the group have to be included in advertising. All forms of performing can be added to the presentation. The ads are performed one at a time. Questions can be asked after the presentation. Feedback to the ads can be given at the end, when everyone can give compliments to each other. The best ad can be chosen by the groups.

18. MY PERFECT FUTURE

Skills in focus Asking questions, dreaming about the future, practising future tenses

Preparations Bring pieces of white paper

Instructions Let students write (and draw if your students are interested in arts) their answers to (all or some of) the following questions on pieces of paper (ab 10 min):

- What would your perfect future look like?
- Do you plan to work or study after graduation?
- What would be your dream job?
- Where are you living (country/ city/countryside, house/apartment, etc.)?
- Who else is there (family members, animals)?
- What does your home look like?

Collect the papers, shuffle them, and let students pick a new paper. Students have to go around, ask questions (but not show the paper and ask “Is this yours?”) and try to find whose future description they have.

19. JOB-INTERVIEW

Skills in focus Asking questions, getting to know each other

Preparations Bingo-sheets with questions for each student and teacher

Instructions In pairs, one student is a business owner/a school headmaster (you can take dream jobs of the students from the previous task), the other is applying for a job there. Show a job interview video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhTcuUvLGOE (20 min) or let students read about job interviews https://hbr.org/2021/11/10-common-job-interview-questions-and-how-to-answer-them for possible questions/answers and then have students practise doing job-interviews (change the roles as well).

Note: Lower-level students need time to prepare the questions and the arguments they would present in written form, give them time to write down the opening and the closing sentences. This makes them more confident in speaking during the interview.

20. ROLE-PLAY

Skills in focus Conversations, interviewing, buying tickets, etc.

Preparations Choose a role-play subject (and a language structure to practise)

Instructions Role-play is a good way to have students practise vocabulary and language structures they need in life, some of the ideas are:

- A doctor of the Emergency Unit and a patient, who needs help, but refuses treatments the doctor offers;
- A ticket officer and a buyer;
- A teacher and a student (arguing over a given mark or discussing the future career of the student for example)
- A detective or journalist interviewing witnesses (one of whom may be a suspect) about what they saw/heard/did (a bizarre noise, theft, a fire, an accident etc). Let students prepare a number of questions and ask them to use the Past Simple tense.
- A TV presenter interviews a group of presidential candidates (or actors, film-makers).
- A Press Conference. A group of journalists interview a politician (or sportsman, film star, etc).
- The Amnesiac. Student A is in bed in a hospital, having lost his memory. The other Students are medical staff, police officers, and visitors (family, friends, etc) who try to bring the memory back. They must be careful. A shock could be fatal.

21. DEBATE

Skills in focus Finding good arguments, reasoning, practising public speaking and monologue

Preparations Prepare a topic for the debate

Instructions Divide your students into groups - for the first debate all students should be either on the "for" or the "against" team. Doing it several times with the same class, some students can be assigned as the audience or the judges as well. For the first debate no judging is necessary and everyone should be involved in the task.

A good topic for the first debate is "Students need homework" - this topic is relevant for every secondary school student and has enough arguments to be pointed out for and against from their experience.

1. Explain the rules: there are two rounds in today's debate - the first round reveals your arguments. Listen carefully to the opposing team and write down their arguments. In the second round, you have to find arguments against your opponents' claims.
2. Give students time to think about five arguments to support or argue with the topic statement. They are allowed to search for information (about research made on the topic), quotes, etc. 10-15 minutes is usually enough.
3. Have the teams assign two speakers - one for the first and one for the second round (tell them it has to be a different person, this way more students get the experience) and a writer, who writes down the arguments of the opposing team.
4. Representatives of both teams come to the front and present their arguments (the "pro" team usually starts, but it can be done in reverse form as well). No discussion between the two representatives is allowed!
5. After both sides have had a chance to speak, the teams get another 10 minutes to prepare a rebuttal and a summary.
6. The order of speech is reversed now and both teams get two minutes to present their rebuttal and summary.
7. A conclusion can be made by the teacher - comment on the arguments of both teams, add some of your suggestions for stronger arguments/information from research made, comment on the teamwork, give praise for good speaking/presentation skills, teamwork, arguments. Tell students that in real debates usually winners are appointed by the judges according to the strength of the arguments and the cohesion of the summary made by the teams, but explain that in class the main idea is to discuss on a relevant topic and have

opportunities to practise public speaking, so everyone who took an active part in the debate, is a winner.

Note: Students might need time for further discussion or individual arguments when the debate has been engaging, prepare some time for that.

CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Some ideas for discussions in groups, suitable for year 10 students:

1. People work better when they get paid better.
2. Dreaming big - does it help to dream bigger or does it create anxiety/depression?
3. Teachers or students - whose job is more difficult and why?
4. Schools will not be necessary in 10 years. All learning will be done online.
5. A foreign language can only be learned, not taught.
6. Very rich people should not have access to public healthcare or education.
7. Restaurants should pay their staff properly, so customers don’t have to leave tips.
8. People are too dependent on computers nowadays.
9. Global warming - is it a natural phenomenon or a people-created problem?
10. Chinese will soon replace English as the first language of the world.

Appendix 2 The Questionnaire

Questionnaire about the speaking course

This questionnaire is anonymous and the results are only used for assessing the value and outcomes of the English language speaking course designed in 2024 for improving students' fluency in speaking English. The course was created during MA studies at the University of Tartu and is primarily meant for 1st year students in Viljandi Gymnasium.

Please answer the questions below as honestly as possible, your answers will help to make the course more efficient and helpful for the next students.

1. Your gender

Female

Male

2. Your current age

3. How many years have you been learning English at school?

4. On a scale from 1 to 10 please mark how good an English speaker you considered yourself before the speaking course in VG. Number 1 meaning that you could not speak any English at all and 10 meaning that you could speak perfect English in every situation and about any topic.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. On a scale from 1 to 10 please mark your willingness to speak English with your classmates and English teacher before the speaking course.

1-no willingness at all; 10-very willing

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. What do you consider as your weakest subskill in English (mark all that apply)

Reading

Writing

Listening

Speaking

7. After the speaking course how would you evaluate your willingness to speak English with your English teacher and classmates? 1- no willingness; 10-very willing

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. How do you evaluate your English speaking skills now after the course?

1- I still can not speak any English; 10- I can speak perfect English in every situation, about any topic

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. What did you like about the speaking course and the tasks?

10. Did you enjoy doing group assignments in the lessons?

11. What activities were the most beneficial to you? You can make multiple choices here.

- Short games to switch our brains to the English language at the beginning of the lessons
- Interviewing your classmates and making conclusions
- Board game about learning English
- Pronunciation and translating new words from "The Chaos"
- Learning new vocabulary with the videos of Lucy and Ben
- Getting to know the CAE exam speaking tasks and trying them out
- "Secret sentences" speaking game
- Creating stories with new vocabulary
- Revising linking words and phrases, having a list of them to practise in tasks
- Listening tasks with different answer types
- Getting to know all the English-speaking countries in the World (online game)
- Choosing my topic to speak about and practising speaking for 1 minute
- Class debate about homework - pro/con
- Other:

12. Were there any activities you disliked?

13. On a scale from 1 to 10 please mark how much anxiety did you experience in the English speaking classes. Number 1 meaning that you felt totally relaxed and 10 meaning that you were very scared and would rather not speak at all.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

14. Do you feel that improvisational speaking tasks, where there are no right or wrong answers, that are done in cooperation with fellow students and in a supportive and friendly atmosphere in class have increased your motivation and willingness to speak English?

15. Do you think these kinds of speaking tasks and games should be a part of English lessons in gymnasiums? Please also give a short justification to your answer.

16. Anything else you would like to add?

RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Kairi Ong

DEVELOPING YEAR 10 STUDENTS' WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE WITH A TASK-BASED EFL SPEAKING COURSE / 10 KLASSI ÕPILASTE SUHTLUSTAHTE PARANDAMINE ÜLESANDEPÕHISE INGLISE KEELE SUHTLUSKURSUSE ABIL

Magistritöö 2024.a.

Lehekülgede arv: 80

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tundis, et nende tahe inglise keeles suhelda ja ka inglise keele suuline keeleoskus õpilaste enda tunnetuse kohaselt arenes kursuse jooksul tehtud ülesannete abil.

Märksõnad: ülesandepõhine, avatud ülesanded, suhtlustahe, inglise keele õpetamine võõrkeelena.

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14.05.2024

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Juhendaja

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14.05.2024