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SUPPORTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO OVERCOME STUDENS' FEAR OF SPEAKING IN ENGLISH IN UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOL

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PREFACE

A large number of students are learning English around the world and many of them might face the problem of fear of speaking in a foreign language. Speaking is considered one of the basic skills of learning a new language, which helps communicate and express students' opinions. With this skill, a student can easily understand and produce language structures. However, for some students it might be an obstacle for a variety of reasons.

One of the aims of this research is to analyze the notion of fear of speaking in a foreign language to understand the main reasons of fear. Moreover, it is important to research why students have the fear of speaking in English. Also, one of the aims of the study is to describe the elements of supportive and safe learning environment and how the creation of such environment can help students overcome the fear of speaking in English. Furthermore, methods of creating and using a supportive English learning environment, which might help students speak fluently without being afraid to speak English will be examined.

The paper consists of four parts: an introduction, two core chapters and a conclusion. In the Introduction, important terms and general factors of fear of speaking in a foreign language are analyzed. The Introduction also explains the topicality of the present study. In the first chapter, reasons of fear, main elements of supporting and creating of a safe English learning environment are researched. The second chapter presents and discusses the findings of a research into the implementation of principles of a safe learning environment. The conclusion summarizes the results of the research and comments on the hypothesis.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays we live in a modern society, which implies being a smart, communicative and flexible person. Knowledge of a foreign language is one of the skills which can help to acquire these qualities and find more opportunities for their realization. It is not a secret that one of the widely-spoken language in the world is the English language. In Estonia, it is an ordinary situation when students choose English language as a first (or second) foreign language in Estonian-medium schools, and second foreign language in Russian-medium schools. People believe that knowledge of this language can give them a chance to be more successful and more competitive in the future for a variety of reasons. Famously, the English language is known as a "language of opportunity", and one of the benefits of speaking English is a possibility to use this language more widely than other languages all over the world, particularly in European countries. "It is spoken, learnt and understood even in those countries where it is not a native's language" (Qureshi, 2000). She believes that it is very important to speak English, because we can communicate with foreigners and share our ideas.

Ur (1996) considers that speaking is the most significant skill among others (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) because it is useless to know the structure of the language without being able to use it in real life. Speaking is a very functional skill, if you want to communicate with people from foreign countries. Moreover, it can give you a chance to choose options for a further study or finding work abroad. It is not only a good experience for you as a person, but if you return to your home, you can be more helpful for people from your country with such experience. Some of us learn the English language because it can help us to broaden our horizons: we have a chance to learn something about new cultures, get an equation with new people, and we can also enrich our knowledge in some specific spheres. However, speaking in another language can be accompanied with fear and anxiety, which can lead to unsuccessful experience in the learning process and can be a reason for not using another language in everyday life.

First of all, I turned to a dictionary to understand the nature of the fear, find a definition of it and understand how it can be connected with learners speaking and how it influences their speaking practice. According to *Cambridge dictionary*, the main meaning of 'fear' is "an unpleasant emotion or thought that you have when you are frightened or worried by something." (*Cambridge dictionary*, 2017).

Relying on the definition from the dictionary it becomes clear that fear is a negative emotion, which is connected with our worries and unpleasant feelings and can

be an obstacle in some situation. When it comes to speaking in a foreign language, fear can be one of the main problems for students in their speaking practice. Nevertheless, this phenomenon requires a deeper and more careful analysis to understand how students can be resistant to this problem and what the main tasks for a teacher as a creator of a supportive English learning environment are.

According to scientific researches and articles, it can be noticed that when it comes to fear of speaking in a foreign language, instead of 'fear' scholars often used the term 'anxiety'. It shows that the meaning(s) of anxiety and fear are closely connected but at this stage of the research it cannot be claimed that they have the same features. It is useful to know when it comes to the understanding of the meaning of fear whether these terms can be used interchangeably.

"Speaking in the foreign language is often cited by students as their most anxiety producing experience" (Young 1990:539). Unfortunately, anxiety plays a big role in second language study. Students often deal with anxiety in school, and many of them have experienced a feeling of it, but it is still a problem to give a definition of anxiety. It is associated with feelings of "uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry" (Scovel 1978:134). *Cambridge dictionary* has been also used to understand how anxiety is connected with fear. Accordingly, one of the definition of anxiety is "an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something that is happening or might happen" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2017). Consequently, it can be supposed that both definitions have something in common, but on the other hand, another definition of anxiety is "something that causes a feeling of fear and worry" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2017). The research on anxiety shows that it can appear on two levels.

> At the deepest, or global, level, trait anxiety is more permanent predisposition to be anxious. Some people are predictably and generally anxious about many things. At a more momentary, or situational level, state anxiety is experienced in relation to some particular event or act (Douglas H.2000:151).

Moreover, Douglas (2000) determines two types of anxiety: debilitative and facilitative anxiety, it can be also called "harmful" and "helpful" anxiety.

> We may be inclined to view anxiety as a negative factor, something to be avoided at all costs. But the nature of facilitative anxiety is that some concern-some apprehension-over a task to be accomplished is a positive factor (Douglas H.2000:151).

It means that sometimes anxiety can be a benefit for students and it can help students to produce their speech successfully. Facilitative anxiety can motivate students work harder because of competitiveness, and teachers' task is to determine which type of anxiety a student feels in the classroom. Therefore, it can be said that the meaning of anxiety is wider than meaning of fear. It can have different levels and types.

Moreover, it includes the concept of fear and can act as it. By virtue of this, we can also include this phenomenon into research and sometimes use this term when it comes to fear.

In addition, this research will analyze a supportive classroom environment only in terms of Estonian students of upper secondary school because when dealing with the creation of a supportive English learning environment, it is necessary to separate young and older learners. If teachers want to help children overcome their fear of speaking, they should also take into consideration their age to understand what kind of methods the teacher should use in some particular period of study and what is the background of students' knowledge and skills.

In Estonia, there are three periods of learning a foreign language: pre-school, basic and upper-secondary education. Pre-school foreign language learning can continue from 18 months of age to 7 years of age. The state curriculum created for children at this stage of learning includes supportive material for their development. At this stage, children learn some basic information about a foreign language and try to use simple vocabulary. Basic education includes 3 stages: stage I – grades 1-3; stage II – grades 4-6; stage III – grades 7-9. As already mentioned, Estonian students who study in Estonian-medium basic schools can choose the English language as a first or second foreign language, and students of Russian-medium basic schools can choose English as a second foreign language (with Estonian being the first foreign language). Students who graduade the 1st stage of study should already have specific oral language skills, which includes: 1) understanding of simple sentences and expressions; 2) usage of the basic vocabulary connected with home, family and school; 3) ability to work in groups; 4) knowledge of some basic information of the country and culture of the language; 5) asking and answering simple questions (*National Curriculum for Basic School*, 2014). In this period, teachers should constantly give support to their students and maximally gently involve them into English learning to increase their motivation and interest. According to Karavasili's study, it is easier to assimilate such language features as "pronunciation and intonation" to students in childhood than to older ones, because they are more able to imitate different sounds and use them in communication with other people. Moreover, we should also take into account children's "flexibility and spontaneity" (Karavasili 2014:1).

> Kids are more willing to communicate with people than adults, they are curious and they are not afraid of making mistakes. They handle difficulties like missing vocabulary very easily by using creative methods to communicate, such as non-verbal means of communication and use of onomatopoetic words (Karavasili 2014:1).

From these facts, it transpires that the teacher should understand that very often the earlier a child starts to speak a second language the better he or she will speak it in the future.

The requirements for oral skills for students at the 2nd stage are: 1) usage of expressions from previous stage; 2) ability to communicate with native speakers; 3) usage of everyday vocabulary; 4) ability to create a short speech or presentation; 5) retellingand discussing short texts. The level of communication skills of the 3rd stage students includes: 1) ability to describe their experience, aims, wishes and believes; 2) ability to create a simple text; 3) usage of daily life vocabulary in communication with foreigners (*National Curriculum for Basic Schools*, 2014). At the end of this stage students should be able to speak and use the English language in everyday life, they can communicate with native speakers and use this language in further studies.

Upper-secondary education includes grades 10 - 12. In this period of study, students have to learn at least two foreign languages. English language is one of the frequently chosen foreign languages in Estonian schools and students have to have a B2 level after upper-secondary school graduation to use this language ''independently'' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015). At the end of the study, students should be able to freely express their opinion, describe their impression, compare and contrast things around them, their pronunciation and intonation should be clear and correct (National Curriculum for Upper-Secondary Schools, 2014). This implies that new students entering upper-secondary school should already have some base in foreign language study and they already can speak this language in daily life using at least basic vocabulary. Unfortunately, in real life, students often feel unsure of themselves when they use foreign language in public situations. They often cannot communicate not only with native speakers but also with their classmates, despite the fact that they already have the experience of using another language from basic school and already have some vocabulary to use it. Teacher's task in this situation is to understand the reason of their anxiety and try to create an appropriate atmosphere, which can help students cope with such problem and motivate them to speak.

Analyzing previous researches, it has been found out that students of Narva College of the University of Tartu are also interested in the topic of supportive English learning environment and speaking skills development. The topics of their graduation papers are closely connected with the analysis of supportive methods of teaching and learning. Mikhail Rogolevskiy in 2013 focused on speaking skills and tried to understand how it can be connected with methods used in the classroom environment.

He believes that "the more methods and aids are used - the better the results are" (Rogolevskiy 2013:7). Vladimir Suvorov in 2015 tried to understand how modern technologies can be used in language learning process and how useful they can be. He considers that some of the programs can be used to help students improve their communication skills and motivate them to speak with other people using social networks. Moreover, Jutta Gabla in 2014 in her research paper tried to reveal the benefits and drawbacks of using game activities to help students develop their speaking skills. Based on these researches it is easier to evaluate the importance of creation of a supportive English learning environment and find the solution for such problem as fear of speaking among students.

The importance of English learning is enormous, especially it is significant for young people, because we live in an international society. We are required to be competent not only in some specific sphere but we should also be able to communicate with people from other countries, because our present world requires to be more multifunctional. Furthermore, it not only requires, but also offers a lot of opportunities to reach it. Teachers can use it for their purposes and explore different learning strategies to make their lessons more non-stressful and stimulating for students. The hypothesis of this research is that students who study in a supportive English learning environment speak English more fluently and have less fear of speaking in English in comparison with those who learn English in the teacher-centered classroom. This research paper can help teachers to better organize their lessons and help students to avoid some stressful situations.

CHAPTER I

REASONS OF STUDENTS' FEAR OF SPEAKING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

1.1 Factors Causing the Fear of Speaking in a Foreign Language

According to Hosni's (2014) research, it is understandable that speaking another language is rather difficult. It is quite a common situation when English language learners cannot express their opinion or communicate with others because of fear. "Students in foreign language classrooms generally report that speaking in the target language is the most anxiety producing experience" (Öztürk 2014:3). To understand why students feel such "debilitative" anxiety it has been found out that there are different factors which can be the root of the problem.

Firstly, it is natural when students feel anxiety when they need to speak in public. Lucas (1983) supposes that people are often worried about doing something important in public. "Your heart races, your hands shake, your knees knock, and your skin perspires" (Lucas 1983:10). He believes that even professionals are nervous before making a speech. Teacher should explain to students that "nervousness" is normal; help them control it and help to understand how they can transform it from the "harmful/debilitative" anxiety into "helpful/facilitative" anxiety.

As was already mentioned, Douglas (2000) argues, that anxiety appears on different levels. Some people can be nervous all the time about different things and it is a global level of anxiety. At the same time, it can be situational, which can be connected with particular situation or moment. "It is important in a classroom for a teacher to try to determine whether a student's anxiety stems from a more global trait or whether it comes from a particular situation in the moment" (Douglas 2000:151). It can help a teacher to find the right method, which can help students to find a solution of their problem connected with fear.

Moreover, Ur (1996: 121) considers that there are four factors, which can be the cause of the difficulty in speaking a foreign language:

1. *"Inhibition"*. Students are often afraid about making mistakes because they fear to be judged by the teacher or classmates and worried about "losing face". In addition, they can be simply shy to speak on another language.

2. *"Nothing to say"*. Students just have no motivation to express their opinion and speak with others.

3. *"Low or uneven participation".* Sometimes some students are more motivated to speak than others, especially in large groups. In such situation, others have less time to express themselves and they speak a little or not at all. Therefore, they have less speaking experience.

4. *"Mother-tongue use".* It is natural when students use their mother tongue when they speak on another language "because it is easier, because it feels unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language, and because they feel less "exposed" if they are speaking their mother tongue".

Furthermore, relying on Hosni's (2014) research, it can be also some factors causing fear of speaking related to the lack of necessary vocabulary. Students cannot participate in a conversation because they have no vocabulary to do so. Firstly, it can be connected with student's motivation. Hosni (2014) believes that some students do not understand why they need to speak in English and do not want to enrich their vocabulary. Littlewood (1981) argues that students without motivation to express themselves cannot develop their communicative skills. Also, the low level of English language vocabulary and lack of motivation of students can relate to teaching strategies and classroom environment. "Teaching strategies also contribute to this problem as they are inadequate, and they do not put emphasis on speaking, which results in a meagre development of this skill" (Dr. Ahmed Maher Mahmoud Al Nakhalah 2016: 100). It can include lack of involvement in "real-life" situations, too difficult or unclear tasks, which students cannot understand, or too boring tasks, where students do not want to participate.

In addition, Park (2009) discovered that when it comes to English speaking anxiety older learners can be more anxious than younger. They are more worried about making mistakes and they feel more responsibility for the results. He considers that age factor can be also a reason of student's fear of speaking in the English language classroom.

To sum up, there can be different factors which can lead to speaking anxiety. They can be psychological factors (self-confidence and self-esteem), methodological factors (class organization and teaching strategies), cognitive factors (not enough vocabulary), social factors (students' or teachers' criticism or judgment) and age factor connected to the different level of worry at different age. Teacher's task is to identify what is the main reason of fear of speaking or it can be also a complex of reasons.

1.2 Consequences of the Fear of Speaking in a Foreign Language

Foreign language anxiety is a serious problem, which can lead to some negative consequences. Unfortunately, teachers often do not take it into account and can be biased against students with such problem. "Foreign language anxiety is a serious issue that cannot be neglected, for having intense anxiety not only results in "poor" performance due to its counterproductive nature, but also leads to avoiding learning foreign language altogether" (Park 2009:22).

According to Liu's and Jackson's (2008) research about learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety, it was found out that fear of speaking in another language can be a reason of a variety of problems. The main problem, which can appear, is unwillingness to communicate. Students do not want to speak because they know that they cannot cope with it and they have less motivation to be a participant of conversation. The more students speak the English language with anxiety, the more they feel such negative feeling and do not want to experience it again. "Consequently, their silence and unwillingness to speak the language in class render them even more anxious" (Park 2009:23). As a result, students do not want to communicate in a foreign language at all. They can have a negative opinion about the language they learn and they can see less opportunity of foreign language usage in everyday life. "Foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety and that it can have a negative effect on the language learning process" (Maclntyre and Gardner 1991:112).

Besides, Liu and Jackson (2008) discovered that unwillingness to communicate can be a reason of "apprehension, low self-esteem, lack of communicative competence, anomie, alienation, and introversion" (Liu and Jackson 2008:1). Therefore, students can be more isolated and feel self-doubt. It is also effects on everyday life. People who can communicate in a foreign language are supposed to be more successful in real life, while those who have lack of ability to express themselves are thought to be less competent and less attractive in social life. Relying on these facts, it is obvious that fear of speaking is a serious problem with negative consequences, which we cannot ignore, and it is necessary to create such an English learning environment which can help and support students to deal with it and overcome it.

1.3 Classroom Environment

Second language-learning environment does not always start with the classroom but it can be closely connected to it when it comes to school, where students spend the majority of their time and it is important to make it supportive. "Your classroom is "home away from home" for you and your students. Make it attractive, comfortable, and

functional" (Young 1997:1). Teachers should understand their students and accommodate a classroom environment to them. It is one of the main aspects of foreign language study. It forms a favorable atmosphere in the class and gives an opportunity to the students to be involved into the process of foreign language acquisition.

Classroom environment can consist of many aspects which should be taken into account. Firstly, Ryan (2013) claims that there can be physical elements, which can be connected with wall art, arrangement of desks, or resources, organizational aspects or content of the study. Moreover, there are different "intangible elements" related to the energy of the classroom and relationship between class members. "Each of these can impact a student's focus and achievement in the class" (Ryan 2013:1).

According to Salford's study, the proportion of classroom environment influence on students' learning progress is 25%. Unfortunately, some teachers prefer not to think about it. Young (2014) believes that positive classroom environment is a place where students can feel confidence, they can express themselves and are not afraid of it, they can take risks and are not afraid of challenges.

1.4 Creation of Supportive Language Learning Environment

Creation of supportive and positive learning environments is not a very difficult process, if teachers know how to organize it. Byrne (1992) believes that there are some basic organizational moments which should be considered by the teacher to provide effective oral practice:

> - "the size of the class (often thirty or more learners);
> - the arrangement of the classroom (which rarely favours communication);
> - the number of hours available for teaching the language (which cannot and should not all be spent on oral work);
> - the syllabus itself, and particularly examinations, which may discourage us from giving adequate attention to the spoken language" (Byrne 1992:1).

It can help teachers already at the first stage to organize their classes and understand what kind of techniques and methods can be used to develop students' oral skills.

Coreen (1998) considers that the design and content of a classroom environment is closely connected with students' language learning success. Moreover, Coreen (1998) explains the importance of creation of positive social ambience in the English language classroom. "The social ambiance of a classroom is equally important in promoting the most effective environment for language learning" (Coreen 1998:71). He offers to establish certain patterns of behavior among the students.

> The class as a whole needs to be tolerant of language mistakes and to make allowances for language learners. Class discussions, for instance, need careful management to ensure that

second language children are given the time they need to formulate their oral contributions (Coreen 1998:71).

It is an aim for the teachers to create a positive, open and understanding classroom to integrate students into the learning environment. Students should feel confidence in their classroom and their speech. They should understand that they are welcome. It can help students who feel speaking anxiety because of worry about making mistakes or fearful criticism and make their speech more spontaneous and fluent.

However, supportive second language learning environment can be different as well. As was already revealed, methods of creating supportive environment are different, and, first of all, teachers should take into consideration students' age. According to the researches discussed above, students' age plays a big role in second language acquisition, and it can influence students' fear of speaking and can be a reason of it. Adolescents are more anxious when it comes to making a speech in another language and they need more support to overcome it. In this way, approach to students should be different. Moreover, supportive classroom environment can be different because of the content of studies. Something that a child can find interesting, can be boring for older students. When it comes to young children, Coreen (1998) believes that it is useful to have a variety of interesting and colorful objects to attract students' attention. The classroom can also include some attractive and unusual items, some costumes or toys from foreign countries, which can be close to children's interests. However, this research is focused on students of upper-secondary school. For them, such kind of activities can be boring, and it would be hard to stimulate older students to talk with toys. Coreen (1998) considers that using of some posters, photos, magazines and journals cuttings, books and printed materials can be more suitable for adolescents. Moreover, there can be also some alternative ways of creating a supportive learning environment. Suvorov (2015) discovered that there are some alternative ways of learning English, which can be helpful for students. Some of them can be also useful when it comes to speaking skills. The best way to involve students into a conversation and stimulate them to speak in another language is to give them an opportunity to feel relaxed in a comfortable and familiar for them situation. Furthermore, it is also good to demonstrate students how they can use such experience in everyday life. Suvorov (2015) considers that teachers can use activities connected with social-networks or computer games. It can motivate students to be a participant of a conversation or game activity. It can help teachers to create an atmosphere which can involve students into English learning process and facilitate communication between students and a teacher.

"The activity must motivate the students i.e. make them want to talk. This may depend to a large extent on how it is presented to them" (Byrne 1986:80).

Moreover, Ur (1996) suggests some supportive strategies which a teacher can use to support students and solve some of the problems connected with speaking:

1. *"Use group work".* It is a good activity for those who are afraid to speak in front of the full class.

2. *"Base the activity on easy language".* It helps students to understand the activity without any problem. It can also include some necessary vocabulary before the start of activity.

3. *"Make a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interest".* The topic of the activity should be clear and exciting.

4. *"Give some instruction or training in discussion skills".* There can be examples of using some important phrases or vocabulary.

5. *"Keep students speaking the target language".* Teacher should ask students to use English as much as possible.

Besides, Park (2009) supposes that some students are less risk-taking than others and do not want to participate in classroom conversation. It can also lead to fear of speaking. Coreen (1998) offers to create a risk-taking environment for students' best results.

> Such a classroom is created by a combination of the right sort of social atmosphere and the teaching strategies chosen by the teacher. It is the aim of the latest language teaching methodology to construct opportunities for children to test out their use of language in a situation where there is a real need to communicate. It is ideal if second language children are involved in practical tasks together with other children in a context where simple communication is low risk and natural. Learners in this situation unconsciously test out the effectiveness of their contribution. Depending on whether their first attempts appear to have the desired effect, they change or expand their later efforts (Coreen 1998:76).

"Risk-taking" environment can stimulate students to speak and can be also supportive. Children feel their responsibility for their speech, trying to use all their knowledge in conversation, and later they can become more confident speakers. It is a good opportunity to teach students practice their English in an extreme situation and not to be afraid of it. Nevertheless, it is not the first step in creation of supportive environment. Firstly, as was already mentioned, there should be a foundation which consists of supportive material, teaching strategies and relationship between classmates. "Risk-taking" environment should not be aggressive. It should motivate students to speak.

Summarizing, it can be said that a teacher should provide an attractive, motivating and supportive language-learning environment, to stimulate students to speak in another language without any fear and anxiety for any age group. It can be

different, but it should include supportive methods and materials, which can be interesting for students.

1.5 Teacher-Student Relationship

A Teacher plays a big part in second language acquisition as a creator of a learning environment. Ryan (2013) considers that students' results inevitably depend on the teachers' strategy of class organization.

> If a teacher is unmotivated or negative there will be a direct impact on the students within the classroom. Similarly, if a teacher is motivated and positive they will likely have a beneficial impact on their students as well (Ryan 2013: 1).

A Teacher can influence students' speaking activity. It is important for a teacher to understand not only how to organize the learning environment, but also how to communicate and interact with students to help them overcome their speaking anxiety and motivate them to communicate.

According to Ur (1996), for some teachers, upper-secondary classes can be more difficult than others. Adolescents can already have some base and language learning experience; however, they may be more difficult to stimulate and motivate, and it can be hard to create trusting relationships between students and a teacher. She offers some points which can be taken into account to build such relationships. Firstly, a teacher should have an authority in class that students can feel that they can rely on him/her. Also, it is important to be fair and respect students in the class. Students should not be afraid of a low result or judgment. Byrne (1986) believes that a teacher should inspire and motivate students express themselves . He considers that teachers' opinion should not suppress students' speech. Moreover, a teacher should be interested in students' ideas and not worry a lot about students' mistakes at the first stage, however, it is appropriate to help students make their speech clearer and more correct. It is important to make their conversation more confident and fluent. Speaking tasks also should not be too difficult. At the start, there can be some short conversational topics or questions not to scare students and to involve them into communicative process.

Furthermore, Byrne (1986) highlights some points which should be taken into consideration when it comes to teacher's attitude towards overcoming students' fear of speaking:

1. Firstly, a teacher should be informal and relaxed. Students should feel that there is nothing to fear.

2. Secondly, a teacher has to be interested and patient. The class atmosphere should be friendly and supportive.

3. Topics of discussion should be related to students' interest, background and experience.

According to it, it can be said that teacher- student relationship is a significant factor, which can help students overcome their fear of speaking or lead to English speaking anxiety. It can be difficult to build positive relationships, but it is mostly a teachers' role to create a strong connection between them, in spite of different backgrounds or abilities of the students.

1.6 Cooperative Learning and Group Work to Reduce the Fear of Speaking

When it comes to foreign language learning process, there are four skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing), which should be developed by students, and most of them can be studied individually. However, speaking skill implies not only individual study but also interaction with other people and it can be an obstacle for many students. One of the best ways to help students speak is to give them an opportunity to communicate with their classmates in a friendly and entertaining atmosphere. There are many methods and tasks to help students to overcome their fear of speaking and one of them is cooperative learning. "Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals" (Smith 1996:1). "In cooperative learning students are not considered as relatively passive recipients of knowledge, but rather active participants and responsible for their own learning" (Silvia 2008:1). Silvia (2008) discovered that such kind of activity makes students more successful in social life and more confident.

One of the best examples of using cooperative learning is group work. Byrne (1986) considers that group work can give students an opportunity to communicate easily and freely. In his opinion, the main benefit of using groups is that they provide a richer climate for communication. A Group can include 6-8 students in a circle but it is not necessary limitation. The size of the group can be smaller and it depends on the number of students in the class. Teacher's task is to explain what students should do in their groups and monitor students' work while they are in process. A Teacher can help with some question but he/she is not a guide. Moreover, Byrne (1986) believes that each group should have their own leader.

> The function of the group leader is not to dominate the group but to coordinate their activities and to serve as a link between the group and you (Byrne 1986:77).

Group work can motivate students to speak and express their opinion to help others. It does not mean that everything will be easy from the start but during the time, it will be easier for students to tell something.

Teachers also need to explain why students need to use only English in group work, what is the opportunity to use this language but not their mother tongue. A Teacher should demonstrate how to avoid difficulties and give an example of some expressions students can use in their speech. Moreover, there are many language games which can be used in group activity, e.g.role-play and simulation. The activity should motivate students to talk, that is why this activity should be attractive. To summarize and to organize group work activity, Byrne (1986) formulates organizational aspects that teachers should take into account in creation of such activity to stimulate students to talk:

1) *Forming groups.* It is the first step of group work organization. It includes distribution of group members. Teacher can unite stronger and weaker students in one group. Students can help each other and it can help to make a good connection between students. However, to avoid the problem when only one-two students make all work instead of others, students should not be extremely different in terms of language proficiency. The teacher can support groups with students who need more help.

2) *Group leader.* As was already mentioned, the leader of the group plays a big role as a coordinator.

3) *The role of the teacher.* When it comes to teacher's role in group work activity there are also some points which teacher should take into account:

   3.1) select activities carefully. Teacher should understand the level of students' knowledge and skills. The task should be understandable and correct. It is incorrect to ask students to do something which is impossible for them and pointless for their speaking experience.

   3.2) work out the instructions for an activity carefully. Instructions should be clear to students, Byrne also offers using the mother tongue if students need it to understand the task.

   3.3) present the activity to the class. To avoid the usage of mother tongue some examples can be given to describe the task.

3.4) monitor the students' performance. Teacher should control the process while the group work discussion. Teacher can help and correct students if they need it.

3.5) provide feedback. All teachers know that it is very important to give their feedback to students, but unfortunately, not all of them use it in their teaching practice. Furthermore, teacher can ask students to give their opinion about their performance, it can help them to understand how to analyze their own mistakes.

3.6) keep a record. It can help teachers in their future practice.

4) *Duration and frequency.* Teacher should try to make group work activity at least once a week to provide enough time for students' language practice.

5) *Problems.* There are some problems connected with organization of group work activity:

5.1) Time. Some teachers believe that group work is "time-consuming", however, it is a good practice to students to use their previous knowledge in real life. It gives them opportunity to express their opinion and share knowledge with classmates in friendly atmosphere.

5.2) Lazy students. To avoid students' laziness, teacher should involve students in group work process as effectively as he/she can. It provides motivation to those who just want to relax and do nothing.

5.3) Use of the mother tongue. It is common and natural when students start to communicate with each other using their mother tongue, it is easier to them to explain something and understand each other. However, it is useless when it comes to improving speaking skills. Students cannot overcome their fear of speaking in another language without speaking practice. Byrne (year) suggests some things which can be useful in this situation. Firstly, teacher needs to explain to students why it is useful to use the English language, what is a benefit of such experience. Moreover, teacher should show them how they can avoid problems connected with speaking practice, it is helpful to give students some expressions which they can use or just some words connected to the topic. In addition, it is possible to ask students to control themselves and make a small punishment to those who use mother tongue. All students should try to support each other to achieve good results.

5.4) Discipline. Difficulties with discipline is a common thing in a classroom. It can be connected not only with students' behavior, but also with their passivity.

Nevertheless, it is easier to motivate students to work in a small group that just ask them to participate in a whole class discussion.

Therefore, group work is a good example of creating a supportive English learning environment and it can help students overcome their fear of speaking and motivate them to speak another language. Considering all organizational steps, teacher can create a positive and attractive atmosphere for children and orientate in the process without any difficulties. In groups, students can share their opinion, discuss some questions and improve teamwork skills, which can increase students' motivation to speak English.

According to the things dicsussed above, supportive language learning environment plays a big role in second language acquisition. It is hard to define what is a supportive environment exactly means because it can be different, but we can identify mane aspects, organizational moments and methods, which can help to create such place.

CHAPTER II
USE OF SUPPORTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

2.1 Aim and Hypothesis

The aim of the empirical research is to find out the reasons of students fear of speaking and understand how it can be avoided by using supportive language learning environment in English classes. the effect of supportive environment on students' speaking anxiety should be analyzed. Supportive English learning environment is key for students' foreign language development and methods of creating such an environment, which can be used by the teacher, can help overcome their fear of speaking. Moreover, teacher's practice of creation of supportive atmosphere can help students speak English more fluently in comparison with those who learn English in the classroom where this approach is not used. To prove this statement, a research was conducted in upper-secondary school English classes.

During my observation practice, I was observed different English language classes in Ida-Virumaa upper-secondary schools. It was noticed, that English lessons in 10-11 classes are more directed to preparation for the state exam and most of the exercises and activities are closely connected with it. All activities were done by using English language only, and it is very useful for students' speaking experience. However, most of the activities had state exam format, which has its limited scope of activities , and students cannot express themselves fully. Furthermore, some of the students do not participate at all. Such kind of class organization was standard in upper-secondary schools I observed. Teachers are often focused on teaching students how to pass exams, but not how to use foreign language in real life. It is difficult to name such environment supportive because of the state exam anxiety. Moreover, some of the teachers may purposely minimize the volume of communicative activities, because they suppose that it is just time-consuming. As a result, students have less practice of using English language in natural situation, and they have pressure because of the exam. what they might do instead is to learn some "useful" phrases connected with some particular topics to have a great result at the exam, but in real life, they cannot communicate in a foreign language. This was one of the reasons to take this topic for the current research.

However, today, some of the Estonian schools are interested in following the *Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy* (2015) and in creation of a supportive learning environment, which includes: changing in the approach to learning (learner-centered

approach), motivated teachers and using of alternative ways of learning (information and communication technologies). One of such schools, *Jõhvi Riigigümnaasium* (high school) was taken for the research.

2.2 Methodology and Sample

A Teacher from *Jõhvi Riigigümnaasium* has already had an experience of usage of supportive learning environment strategies but not in a regular way. He was asked to make an experiment with his students to analyze how supportive learning environment influences students' speaking anxiety and how beneficial it is to use it. This experiment was conducted among the students of the tenth grades of upper-secondary school (10E, and 10F) and lasted one month. It is important to understand that these students already have English learning experience and background, which provide a base and second language vocabulary. During the experiment, the teacher had to use elements of a supportive English learning environment all the time and only in one group, while in the second group there was mostly teacher-centered classroom - students working alone, doing tasks from the course book and preparing for the exams, they do not cooperate with other students and their focus is on the teacher.

The teacher was asked to make a test with each group at the beginning and at the end of the experiment. It would help to compare the results of two different classes at the beginning and at the end of the experiment and examine the benefits of usage of supportive environment. Moreover, a questionnaire for students was made and distributed to find out their feelings and emotions connected with speaking in English before and after the experiment.

2.2.1 The Results of the First Testing and Survey

As was already discovered, students' quality of speech is closely connected with their level of fear of doing speaking tasks. At the start of the experiment, a test was conducted to compare two classes and analyze students' speaking skills at the start and at the end of the experiment. The test was in the form of a monologue where students had to express their opinions on a particular topic. The structure of the monologue was based on the state exam format. It lasted 6-7 minutes (2 minutes for preparation and 4-5 minutes for discussion of the topic). The teacher had a marking scale for more accurate assessment and it included task completion, vocabulary, grammar and language (fluency and pronunciation). Students could have a maximum of 5 points for each part. The total number of points for the monologue was 20 p.

10 E	Total points	10F	Total points
Student 1	10/20	Student 1	7/20
Student 2	9/20	Student 2	5/20
Student 3	10/20	Student 3	7/20
Student 4	11/20	Student 4	9/20
Student 5	9/20	Student 5	9/20
Student 6	9/20	Student 6	7/20
Student 7	9/20	Student 7	10/20
Student 8	7/20	Student 8	5/20
Student 9	10/20	Student 9	9/20
Student 10	8/20	Student 10	5/20
Student 11	10/20	Student 11	5/20
Student 12	6/20	Student 12	10/20
GPA	**9**	**GPA**	**7**

Table 1. *Results of the first testing (before the experiment)*

There were 12 students in each group and all of them had the same structure of the monologue and topics. The Results of the first testing shows that group 10 E has higher results than 10 F. The average score for 10 E group is 9 points and for 10 F is 7 points. Moreover, we can see that the level of students' speaking skills is approximately the same in each of the groups.

Furthermore, after testing, a survey was conducted among both groups of the students on the basis of a questionnaire. There were 24 participants from both classes (10 E and 10F). All of the students had already learned the English language in basic school. The questionnaire had one and the same variant at the beginning and at the end of the experiment. It included five questions. The first question was about student's difficulties connected with different skills in English (writing, listening, speaking and reading). The results of it could help to understand to what extent speaking is difficult for students compared with other skills. The second question shows how students evaluate their speaking skills. The third and fourth questions are about fear of speaking. The third one shows what students feel when they need to speak in English. It can help to find out how many students are anxious or afraid of speaking in English. The fourth one helps to analyze why they feel it. In addition, the last question helps to understand

the importance of English language classes at school in terms of improvement of speaking skills.

According to the results of the first survey conducted at the beginning of the experiment, it was found out that 31% of students in group 10E consider that speaking is the hardest skill for them, and as for group 10F about 40% of total number of students consider speaking the hardest skill. Moreover, students were asked to evaluate their speaking skills from one (the lowest) to five (the highest). Relying on their opinion, the average score for 10E group is 3.2 out of 5, and for 10F it is 2.1 . When it comes to fear of speaking, the results show that students from 10 F group are more anxious about speaking than students from 10E group. 69% are afraid or just feel insecure when they need to speak in English. Most of them (43%) explain it by lack of vocabulary, they are also afraid of making mistakes (39%). Some of them consider that they need more speaking practice (15%) and only 3% suppose that they have no motivation to express themselves. 10E group also have a large number of students who have speaking anxiety (61%), and only 39 % of them are relaxed or have no special feelings about speaking in English. The majority of them (52%) worry about making mistakes and they feel that they have not enough vocabulary to express themselves (39%).
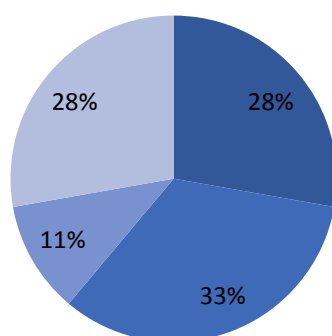

Figure 1. *Feelings about speaking in group 10E (before the experiment)*
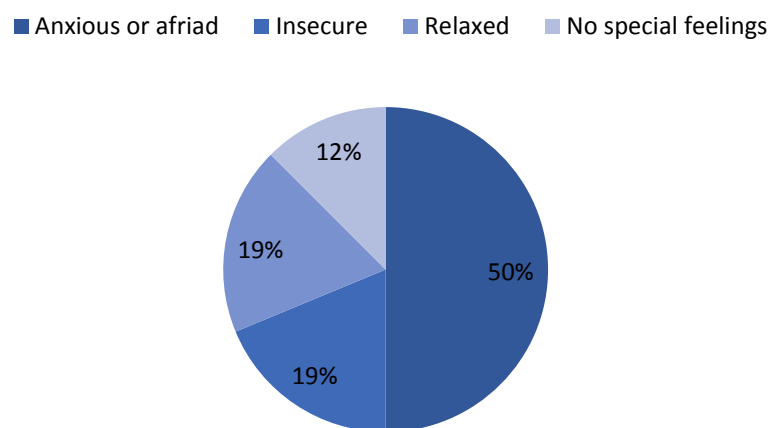
Figure 2. *Feelings about speaking in group 10F (before the experiment)*

In addition, some of the students believe that English language classes can help them to improve their language skills. In 10E group, about 39% of students share this opinion and in 10F group, about 53%.

According to the results, it was found out that both of the groups have such problem as fear of speaking in the English language. The second group (10F) have more students who have speaking anxiety in comparison with the first one (10E). The results of the testing also show that. Relying on it, it was decided to use a supportive learning environment in the second group (10F) to get to know which result they would achieve: will they stay on the same level, gain the level of the first group, or have a better result than the first group (10E). At the same time, we will see what result students can achieve without such an environment in case of group 10E.

2.2.2 Supportive Language Learning Environment

During one month, the teacher used supportive English learning environment with the 10F group and conducted teacher-centered lessons with the 10E group. The teacher was informed on how to create such an environment. Firstly, he took into account all organizational moments connected with the size of the class, the arrangement of the classroom and the number of hours available for speaking activity. He informed the students of 10F about the importance of their behavior in the class. The teacher explained to them how they need to react to each other's mistakes and how significant it is to support each other while studying to create a positive atmosphere where everyone can express themselves without fear. The teacher also carefully selected content of the lessons. Topics were exciting and topical for students. Moreover, group work was used

as one of the methods of creating a supportive learning environment. Group work activities were organized once a week during the month. Each of the students had a chance to have conversational practice. All difficult parts of the tasks were discussed and explained by the teacher. One of the examples of the group work activity was a debate on a given topic in groups. The topic was about social networks, which is very close to students' reality. Furthermore, there was classroom discussion about an episode of a series, which they had watched in the classroom. Students were divided into groups of 3 people and discussed main ideas of the episode and their own ideas about the topic were analyzed. Students had an experience of everyday life communication and shared their opinions with others.

2.2.3 The Results of Second Testing and Survey

At the end of the experiment, the same test was also made by the teacher to find out if it useful to create a supportive environment for students and to understand how helpful it can be to overcome fear of speaking. The test had also a monologue format, which included the same structure. Two groups (10E and 10F) were asked to make an individual monologue speech. The only difference was that in one group (10F) elements of a supportive learning environment were used every lesson, but in another one (10E) there were just some common tasks from the course book and some of them were based on the exam format.

10 E	Total points	10F	Total points
Student 1	13/20	Student 1	6/20
Student 2	14/20	Student 2	7/20
Student 3	12/20	Student 3	9/20
Student 4	12/20	Student 4	9/20
Student 5	10/20	Student 5	6/20
Student 6	4/20	Student 6	12/20
Student 7	4/20	Student 7	6/20
Student 8	7/20	Student 8	7/20
Student 9	9/20	Student 9	7/20
Student 10	6/20	Student 10	6/20
Student 11	3/20	Student 11	6/20
Student 12	6/20	Student 12	10/20

GPA	8	GPA	8

Table 2. *Results of the second testing (after the experiment)*

The GPA of the first group (10E) decreased by one point. Some students have lower results than they had in the first testing. When it comes to the second group (10F), their GPA increased by one point. It shows that without a supportive environment student's speech becomes less fluent, and, on the contrary, a regular usage of supportive atmosphere may increase student's potential already after a month. At the end of the experiment, both of the groups have the same average score. Surely, the influence of other factors on students' performance cannot be ruled out and the conclusions are quite tentative and non-generalizable.

For more accurate results, the second survey of students' feelings was made. The questionnaire had the same questions to compare results before and after the experiment. 50 % of the students from the first group (10E), where supportive environment was not used, considered that speaking became the hardest skill in language learning. The number of them increased by 19% in comparison with the first results. The second group (10F) have the same results as in the first questionnaire: 40% suppose that speaking is hardest skill. In 10E group, students' average score of speaking skills assessment based on their opinion became lower: only 2.7 out of 5. In contrast, 10F group evaluate their speaking skills better: their average score is 2.9 out of 5. When it comes to fear of speaking, the number of students who have speaking anxiety or feel insecure in 10E group increased by 4%, and in 10F group again 69% of students feel fear or insecurity and only 31% are relaxed while speaking.

Legend: ■ Anxious or afraid ■ Insecure ■ Relaxed ■ No special feelings
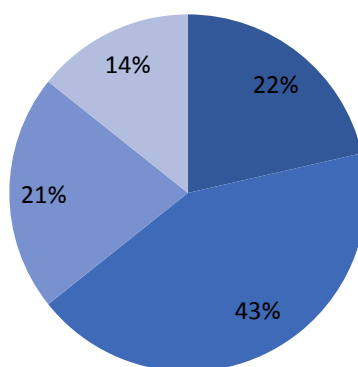
Pie chart values: 22%, 43%, 21%, 14%

Figure 3. *Feelings about speaking in group 10E (after the experiment)*
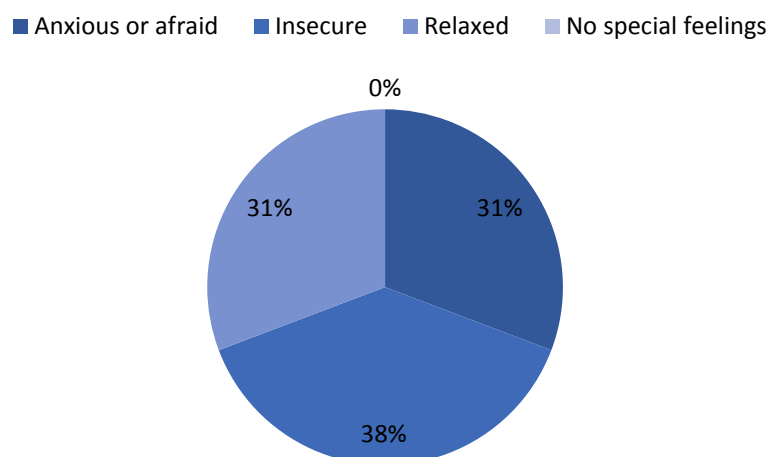
Figure 4. *Feelings about speaking in group 10F (after the experiment)*

The same number of students of both classes believe that English language classes can help them to improve their language skills. In 10E group, it is about 39%, and 53% of students of 10F group believe that English classes in school can help them in speaking skills improvement.

2.3 Results and Discussion

In conclusion, it is clear that the results are not so obvious. Two groups of students had different conditions. In 10F group regular supportive environment was created and in 10E group it was not. It was assumed, that students being in a supportive environment would improve their results in speaking and would feel less fear of speaking. According to the testing results, it was found out that students of 10F group actually improved their results in speaking and the results of the survey showed it too. Students became more confident in their speech and the results of their self-assessment of speaking skills showed a higher level after the experiment. Unfortunately, their fear of speaking stayed on the same level. It can be caused by many reasons such as the limited time of using supportive environment (one month), different motivation among students and their personal reasons. When it comes to the results of the second group (10E), they showed that classes without supportive environment have a negative influence on students. Their results of testing and self-assessment became lower and the level of fear of speaking became higher than before the experiment.

CONCLUSION

To sum up all of the results of the current research, a general conclusion has to be made. As was already discovered, one of the most difficult skills of foreign language acquisition is speaking. Today, there are still students who have difficulties with speaking in a foreign language . One of the main reasons of it is the fear of speaking, which can appear because of a variety of reasons, and one of the things, which can help students overcome it is a supportive learning environment, which teachers can use in their English classes.

The main purpose of the present research was to achieve the following aims: understand the nature of fear of speaking, analyze why students have a fear of speaking, describe elements of supportive language learning environment, find out how creation of supportive English learning environment can affect students' overcoming the fear of speaking. . The theoretical part reviewed different reasons of fear of speaking. It was discovered that fear of speaking or, as it is often called in literature, speaking anxiety can be connected with psychological factors, methodological factors, cognitive factors, social factors and age factor, and it can appear on different levels. Teacher should also take into account the consequences of fear of speaking, which can be also different. The theoretical part of the thesis includes an analysis of the necessity of supportive English learning environment in order for students to overcome fear of speaking. the main components of supportive and positive learning environment and methods which can be used to create it were reviewed. The theoretical part also discussed an example of cooperative learning such as group work. It is one of good examples of activities that a teacher can use to support speaking. The group work strategies and benefits were analyzed.

The practical part of the research includes an overview of an empirical research into fear of speaking and using of a supportive language learning environment. The research included a survey, testing and an experiment, in which participated two classes of upper-secondary school. The main reason of this research was to reinforce the theoretical part and prove the hypothesis, which considers that students who study in a supportive English learning environment speak English more fluently and accurately and have less fear in comparison with those who learn English in the classroom where this approach is not used. The results showed that students in a supportive learning environment are more confident in their speech and their results became higher in comparison with the second group, where such environment was not used. However,

despite the fact that students' speech became relatively more fluent and accurate, their fear of speaking stayed on the same level as at the beginning of the experiment.

In this way, it can be said that all of the aims of the thesis were achieved. However, the hypothesis is proved partially. It shows that a supportive learning environment can help students speak more confidently, but more time is probably needed to help them to overcome speaking anxiety.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö põhineb inglise keele rääkimisoskuste arendamisel gümnaasiumis. Rääkimine teises keeles on üks raskemaid oskusi ja õpetajate töö on toetada õpilast ja kujundada õppimist toetav õhkkond, mis võib aidata neil mitte karta rääkida. Uuringus on käsitletud erinevaid meetodeid ning aspekte, mida võib kasutada, et kujundada õppimist toetavat õhkkonda inglise keele rääkimisoskuste arendamise toetamiseks.

Bakalaureusetöö koosneb sissejuhatusest, kahest peatükist ja kokkuvõttest. Töö eesmärk on aru saada, mis on rääkimise hirm, analüüsida, miks õpilased kardavad rääkida teises keeles, loetleda kõik õppimise õhkkonda toetavaid aspekte ja elemente, uurida, kuidas hooliv ja õppimist toetav õhkkond võib mõjutada õpilaste rääkimise hirmu.

Sissejuhatus annab põhilise informatsiooni inglise keele kasulikkusest ning uurib, mis on hirm. Ka on hüpotees, mis kinnitab, et õpilased, kes õpivad toetavas õpikeskkonnas, räägivad inglise keelt vabamalt, kui need, kes õpivad selles õpikeskkonnas, kus selliseid meetodeid ei ole kasutatud.

Esimeses peatükis, mis on samas ka teoreetiline, on kirjeldatud, miks õpilased tunnevad hirmu teises keeles rääkimise vastu ning millised võivad olla tagajärjed. Veel on näidatud õppimist toetava õhkkonna aspekte ja meetodeid, mida võivad õpetajad kasutada õppeprotsessis.

Teises peatükis on esile toodud uuring, mis koosneb küsitlusest, tasemetööst ning saadud tulemuste analüüsist. Küsitluse ja tasemetöö abil saadud tulemuste analüüs näitab, et õpilased räägivad inglise keelt õppimist toetavas õhkkonnas kindlamalt ja vabamalt, võrreldes nendega, kes õpivad õpikeskkonnas, kus toetava õhkkonna meetodeid ei ole kasutatud. Õpilaste küsitlus ka näitab, et vaatamata sellele, et nad räägivad paremini, nende hirm ei ole täiesti kadunud.

Kokkuvõtteks tulemustele põhinedes me võime kinnitada, et õppimist toetav õhkkond võib aidata õpilastel rääkida teises keeles vabamalt juba kuu pärast, aga et hirmust pääseda on vaja rohkem aega.

APPENDICES
Appendix 1.

Student's Questionnaire

Dear Respondent,

I am a student of Narva College of the University of Tartu and I am doing a research about a supportive English learning environment to overcome students' fear of speaking. I am trying to analyze why students have a fear of speaking and how teachers can help them to overcome it.

Please give some information about yourself:

- Your age:............ years.
- How many years have you been learning English?.............years.

Instructions: Please put a tick next to the answer of your choice.

1. What part is the hardest for you in English language learning?
    - o Writing
    - o Listening
    - o Speaking
    - o Reading

2. How would you evaluate your speaking skills? (Please estimate from one (the lowest) to five (the highest) and put a tick).

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.

3. How do you feel when you speak English?
    - o Anxious or afriad
    - o Insecure
    - o Relaxed
    - o No special feelings

* Next question only for those who have chosen "anxious, afraid or insecure" in Question 4.

4. Why do you feel fear or inecurity?

- I worry about making mistakes (pronunciation or grammar).
- I do not have enough vocabulary
- I have no motivation to express myself
- I need more speaking practice.

5. How do you improve your speaking skills? (you can chose more than one answer)
    - In English language classes at school
    - In English language classes outside school
    - Reading or listening in English
    - Communicating with foreigners
    - Participating in international projects.
    - Other: _____

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