Foreign language anxiety among Swedish lower and upper secondary school students
A case study

Språkängslan inför främmande språk bland svenska högstadie- och gymnasieelever
En fallstudie

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Abstract

In classrooms all over the world, there are students who fear the attention of both teachers and peers alike. Anxiety is a cause for such fears and in foreign language classrooms it can be prevalent. Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a concept developed by Horwitz et al (1986) to describe the unique anxiety that arises in a foreign language learning situation. Anxious students are less prone to use their target language and feel less motivated in their language studies, both of which have a negative effect on their learning. The aim of this study was to measure and compare anxiety levels among Swedish lower and upper secondary school students, identify major sources of anxiety and gain understanding of individuals’ perception of foreign language anxiety. 49 subjects from two classes participated in the study. Their anxiety was measured with the foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al (1986). Interviews were used to gain insight into the subjects’ perception of foreign language anxiety. The results showed that a majority of the subjects were anxious and that students in the lower secondary school class were more anxious than the upper secondary school class. The identified major sources of anxiety were teacher-induced anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and general anxiety.

Keywords: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), Swedish learners of English


Nyckelord: Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), språkängslan, engelska som främmande språk, svenska engelskstudenter
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1. Introduction

A reason for teaching English in school is to make sure that students gain the ability to communicate with speakers of foreign languages (Skolverket, 2011). The communicative skills needed for this are, according to the Swedish National Agency for Education, reception, production, interaction, and adaptation (Skolverket, 2011). Teachers and schools are to help students develop these skills in order for them to become more competent communicators. They need self-confidence to express themselves in a second language. However, to be able to communicate, students must overcome a natural barrier, namely that of anxiety. Anxious learners of a foreign language fear using the target language. von Wörde (2003) reported of students who hunched over their benches in the hope of avoiding to speak in class. One student in the study even considered it torture to wait for his turn to speak. If foreign language learners are too anxious to use the target language the effectiveness of their learning may be drastically reduced. Anxiety may also reduce learners’ willingness and motivation to learn a foreign language. Foreign language anxiety is a concept developed by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986), who defined it as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning” (Horwitz et al 1986, p. 128). Anxiety affects students learning a second language and may, according to Krashen (1981), act as an affective filter making learners “unreceptive to language input.” Consequently, an anxious learner will neither acquire nor learn the target language at the same rate as a non-anxious learner. Since anxiety can have a great impact on learning it is of utmost importance to identify anxious students and take measures to reduce their anxiety in class.

1.1 Aims

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What major sources of anxiety can be identified among Swedish students of English?
2. Is there a difference between the anxiety levels of students at lower and upper secondary schools?
3. How do students themselves perceive foreign language anxiety?
4. Which measures do students believe could be taken to reduce anxiety in class?

This study intends to answer the research questions by studying two English L2 classrooms in Sweden. The subjects are students from two classes, one in lower secondary and the other in upper secondary school. The study makes use of a questionnaire to gather quantitative data on anxiety levels in the L2
English classroom. Interviews are used to gain an understanding of the students’ own awareness of anxiety and a better understanding of actual anxiety in the classroom.

2. Literature review

This section discusses the origin and development of research on language anxiety. It also gives an overview of some research on foreign language anxiety in different learning contexts across the globe and research on how to overcome it.

2.1. Foreign language anxiety as established by Horwitz et al

In 1986, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope first described the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety. They all taught foreign languages at the University of Texas and had noticed the prevalence of anxiety in their classes. They also realized that there was no readily available tool to identify and measure anxiety amongst students. This led them to write an, to this day, often cited paper that is the foundation of foreign language anxiety research. Their general definition of anxiety was the “subject feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Horwitz et al, 1986, p. 126). Consequently, anxiety is what stops some people from talking in front of a crowd, performing a stunt or some other action that puts them in the limelight. For some people, such anxious feelings only occur in specific situations, such as language learning. Psychologists differentiate specific anxiety reactions from general anxiety, which is present at all times (Horwitz et al, 1986). However, the subjective feelings and responses to anxiety are similar for most forms of anxiety. They include, but are not restricted to, worry, concentration problems, forgetfulness, sweating and avoidance behaviour (Horwitz et al, 1986). It is reasonable to assume that these are symptoms that hinder learning and create problems for students in their studies. Horwitz et al (1986) reported that at the University of Texas, the most common cause for foreign language anxious students to seek out the school counsellor was problems with speaking. The students seldom had problems responding to drills or pre-rehearsed assignments, but the difficulties arose in role plays where students would freeze and become unable to perform. Another anxiety-filled situation proved to be test-taking. Students reported to the counsellor that they would forget things that they knew, or that they became stressed and made “careless” errors. To overcome their anxiety, some students would “overstudy” and spend many hours with their material without actually learning much. The opposite was also common, that those who felt anxious avoided studying and skipped their classes to avoid situations that caused anxiety. Horwitz et al (1986) compared foreign language anxiety to three other, similar, forms of anxiety; 1) communication apprehension, 2) test anxiety and 3) fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension encompasses difficulty speaking in groups, stage fright and receiver anxiety. Receiver anxiety arises when listening and/or, reading. When people talk to a group, or from a stage, or even
listen to someone speaking from a stage, it is important that they have the feeling of control. It is when someone feels out of control e.g. due to language barriers, that they become anxious, as explained by Horwitz et al (1986):

People who typically have trouble speaking in groups are likely to experience even greater difficulty speaking in a foreign language class where they have little control of the communicative situation and their performance is monitored. (Horwitz et al, 1986, p. 127)

Consequently, for L2 learners, not only is the situation out of their control, they are also forced to use a language which they do not fully control. The lack of control may cause otherwise talkative and open persons to stay silent and therefore never get the chance to improve their L2 speaking proficiency. When it comes to test anxiety, it is a kind of performance anxiety that stems from fear of failure. Those who suffer from it often put higher demands on themselves than their peers and they need their performance to be perfect on every test. In language courses this tends to be particularly problematic, since tests, both written and oral, tend to occur more frequently than in other subjects (Crookall & Oxford, 1991). Lastly, fear of negative evaluation is defined by Horwitz et al (1986) as “apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (Horwitz et al, 1986, p. 128). While otherwise similar to test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation is not limited to test-taking situations. It is a broader concept and may occur in any social situation where a person is evaluated, or feels evaluated. In a foreign language class, that means almost at all times, as the teacher needs to continuously evaluate the students’ performance in order to help them where it is lacking.

Horwitz et al (1986) recognize the three forms of anxiety as “useful conceptual building blocks” for describing foreign language anxiety but they believe it to be something more than that. They define foreign language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz et al, 1986, p. 128). What makes the language learning process unique when compared to other academic anxieties is that there is a discrepancy between a learners’ perception of their “true self” and the person they are perceived as when using the L2, due to their limited knowledge of the foreign language.

Making use of the concept of foreign language anxiety, Horwitz et al (1986, p. 130) set out to find a reliable way to measure its prevalence amongst students. After a period of discussions with language learning support groups, consisting of 78 students divided into groups of 15 each, Horwitz et al created the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). It is a scale of anxiety that is measured in a
questionnaire, the FLCAS questionnaire, consisting of 33 statements that are answered on a 5-point Likert scale with the purpose to examine the “scope and severity” of foreign language anxiety. Their findings suggest that many students suffer from significant foreign language anxiety in at least some aspects of language learning. Out of the 33 statements, 19 were agreed upon by one third of the students participating in their pilot study, suggesting that these, at times, suffered from anxiety in their language class. Having found a reliable way to measure anxiety, it was also discovered that there was a negative correlation where an increase of anxiety led to a decrease in performance (Horwitz et al, 1986).

Horwitz et al (1986, p. 127) noted that some students believed that it was not acceptable to make mistakes. However, making mistakes can be an essential part of learning a language. When students encounter communication difficulties they perform negotiation of meaning in order to be successful in their communication (Bitchener, 2004). Negotiation of meaning is a process where the person speaking is unable to convey the intended messages clearly to a listener and a negotiation has to take place to make the conversation meaningful. An example sequence follows:

S1: The bus has ended
S2: You mean the bus has stopped?
S1: Yes, the bus has stopped. (My example, based on Bitchener, 2004, pp. 82-83).

Studies show that negotiation of meaning causes learners to become aware of their language mistakes and, in many cases, alter their speech (Bitchener, 2004, p. 83). In negotiation of meaning, the mistakes are often caused by over-extension of known rules or interference from the L1 and are hard to notice for an L2 learner. There is a risk that if the students refrain from communicating they will not notice these mistakes and consequently not learn the correct form (Ur, 2012 p. 44)

Horwitz et al’s study was just the beginning of foreign language anxiety research and their findings might have been too small to verify the phenomenon. Since then, however, their concept of foreign language anxiety and the FLCAS have been used in a multitude of studies and remain to this day the standard of foreign language anxiety research. A number of studies that use the FLCAS are examined in the following sections (Aida, 1994; Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002; von Wörde, 2003; Liu, 2006; Tóth, 2010; Mak, 2011; Huang, 2012).

2.2 Studies challenging the concept of foreign language anxiety

Since its introduction in 1986, the concept of foreign language anxiety has not only been used in a multitude of studies but has also been challenged and further developed. In 2012, Trang wrote a paper reviewing the current state of foreign language anxiety as a concept in language theory. Trang raises four points of concern towards Horwitz et al’s (1986) theory; 1) the direction of the causal relationship
between foreign language anxiety and language learning difficulties, 2) the importance of foreign language anxiety for language learning, 3) the components of foreign language anxiety and 4) the validity of the foreign language classroom anxiety scale (Trang, 2012). A point which has been challenged by many researchers in the field of language learning is Horwitz et al’s (1986) theory that language learning difficulties are caused by foreign language anxiety. According to some challengers, the relationship is reversed; anxiety is caused by poor proficiency (Trang, 2012). This kind of “chicken and egg” question is difficult and there is currently no clear answer to it. There are, however, many studies on the correlation between anxiety and language production skills and language comprehension skills. According to the theory that learning difficulties are caused by anxiety, anxious students would fare worse in productive than receptive assignments since the demanding nature of the former is more anxiety-provoking. In one such study, Argaman and Abu-Rabia (2002) examined the influence of anxiety on English writing and reading tasks amongst native Hebrew speakers. The subjects were 68 junior high school students aged 12-13 with Hebrew as their native language. The method included the foreign language classroom anxiety scale questionnaire, as well as two assignments; a reading assignment and a writing assignment. The results showed a negative correlation between anxiety and the two tested skills, reading and writing. That means that the higher anxiety, the lower reading and writing performance. Interestingly, there were numerous subjects who refused to do the writing assignment but instead wrote their reasons for not doing it, in English. They stated reasons such as English being too hard, or just plainly refused to write because there was no impact on their grade (Argaman & Abu-Rabia, 2002).

In a study from 1999, Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999) presented a further development of the theory and introduced the concept of foreign language reading anxiety. Because reading is a receptive skill and assumed to be less anxiety-provoking than productive skills, it is often overlooked in foreign language anxiety studies. Their results show that foreign language reading anxiety is likely separate from general foreign language anxiety but that there is a significant correlation between the two. That means that even receptive skills may cause anxiety and decrease proficiency for students.

The definition of foreign language anxiety is fleeting and research similar to that of Argaman and Abu-Rabia’s (2002) does not really answer the question whether anxiety leads to lower proficiency or vice versa. It would be hard to design a study that would answer it. Foreign language anxiety, as conceptualized by Horwitz et al (1986), is complex and contains many forms of anxiety, not only communication apprehension. If difficulties lead to anxiety, rather than anxiety leading to difficulties, the number of anxious students would decrease at higher levels of education, such as among university English majors. This is not the case however; researchers have found anxious students at all levels of education. Tóth (2010) studied foreign language anxiety amongst Hungarian English major students. Tóth’s subjects were 117 first year English major students at a Hungarian university. Anxiety was
measured on a foreign language classroom anxiety scale that had been translated into Hungarian and been adapted to fit the setting of the study. Out of the 117 students, 20% were found to be non-anxious, 58% slightly anxious, 20% considerably anxious and 2% very anxious. Tóth also found that according to their grades, the highly anxious students performed more than 20% worse than their low anxiety colleagues (Tóth, 2010). While high proficiency seemingly correlates with low anxiety, there are nevertheless anxious students majoring in English, as can be seen in Tóth’s (2010) study. Considering that they have to be proficient enough to study at that level, it is reasonable to assume that proficiency is not a cure to anxiety.

The occurrence of highly anxious English majors is supported by studies such as Mak (2011) and Liu (2006) who conducted similar studies and got similar results in Hong Kong and mainland Chinese settings. Liu’s (2006) study was split in two. First a modified Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) questionnaire was administered to 547 undergraduate students from three proficiency levels. Secondly, one class from each proficiency level, totalling 100 students, was included in a study spanning 14 weeks. Data were gathered using four methods: students’ reflective journals, teachers’ records of the least and the most anxious students, classroom observations and interviews. The purpose of the study was to measure anxiety in order to examine the relationship between proficiency and anxiety. 70% of the students reported feelings of anxiety in their reflective journals. The top reasons were poor language skills and fear of losing face. There turned out to be a strong negative correlation between proficiency and anxiety, where higher proficiency led to lower anxiety and vice versa. In Mak’s (2011) study, 313 students taking a compulsory English course at a Hong Kong University participated and were administered a modified FLCAS questionnaire. Of the 313 students, 60% answered the FLCAS questionnaire at levels that indicate anxiety. The most anxiety-provoking factor was speaking and fear of negative evaluation.

The second challenge to the theory of foreign language anxiety as highlighted by Trang (2012) is whether it is an area that is actually important to study. In a paper commenting on Saito et al’s (1999) study, Sparks, Ganschow and Javorsky (2000) introduced their theory that L2 learning is “primarily based on one’s native language learning ability” (Sparks et al, 2000, p. 251) and that any difficulties in the L1 will carry over to the L2 and those difficulties are the cause of anxiety among L2 learners. They consider anxiety to be a rather small side effect of poor performance rather than a major cause of it (Sparks et al, 2000, p. 252). According to Sparks et al. (2000, p. 253), researchers should focus on actual language learning and teaching methodology rather than anxiety. That being said, many studies oppose this view, especially studies that include students’ thoughts on the matter. von Wörde (2003),

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1 At the university studied, English students are split into three “bands” based on their proficiency. Liu’s subjects came from all three bands.
for instance, interviewed 15 anxious students of three different foreign languages (French, German and Spanish) about their beliefs, experiences and feelings regarding foreign language learning with the objective to obtain a student perspective on anxiety. The results reveal that these anxious students had a very negative relationship to their foreign language class with extreme symptoms, physical as well as psychological. The symptoms included manifestations such as “tears,” “foot tapping, desk drumming,” “I clamp up, I get very tense and I start balling my fists.” There was one student who would “hunch over her desk in a kind of protective shell” (von Wörde, 2003). Some students reported that they would “just completely blank out,” another student claimed that she was “petrified in that class, just totally petrified.” Others would react by being angry at the teacher (von Wörde, 2003). These extreme symptoms would not occur in other classes that the students were taking. As described above, foreign language learning is a unique situation (Horwitz et al 1986) and it causes a unique form of anxiety that seems to affect some learners in extreme ways. It is clear that anxiety is a major problem for those suffering from it.

The third disagreement with Horwitz et al’s (1986) theory, as stated by Trang (2012), is that some researchers do not consider test anxiety to be uniquely connected to foreign language anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) did a study on 104 subjects in order to examine three components of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and also how these components are related to general forms of anxiety. The purpose was to see if the components were uniquely related to foreign language anxiety or if they could rather be related to general forms of anxiety. The study was split into three parts. First the subjects completed a questionnaire containing anxiety scales. Secondly, they were given four trials to learn 38 English-French word pairs and were tested before each trial. The final part involved vocabulary together with free recall of the word pairs (MacIntyre & Garnder, 1989). Their results generally support Horwitz et al’s theory of foreign language anxiety, that it is a distinct complex that is separate from other anxieties. However, test anxiety was not significantly related to foreign language anxiety. Their conclusion was that test anxiety is connected to general anxiety rather than to foreign language anxiety specifically (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Further research, such as Aida (1994), who examined foreign language anxiety in a Japanese setting, has since then confirmed this standpoint. In a more recent article, Horwitz (2010) responded to the criticism by restating that foreign language anxiety is a specific form of anxiety. Rather than being composed of communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, it is simply related to them. As specified by Horwitz et al in 1986, foreign language anxiety is defined as “a distinct complex” and “situation-specific” anxiety.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges to the theory of foreign language anxiety, it has become widely recognised as a unique “type of anxiety, not a transfer of other forms of anxiety” (Trang, 2012).
Furthermore, Trang states that Horwitz et al.’s (1986) original theory has played a key role in the study of language learning anxiety and that a large number of studies have employed it in their theoretical framework (Trang, 2012).

2.3 Sources of foreign language anxiety

The present section discusses current research on foreign language anxiety in the classroom environment, its causes and, in accordance with Horwitz et al.’s (1986) and Horwitz’ (2010) theory, its effects on students. It also discusses practical strategies on how to reduce foreign language anxiety. Huang (2012) has published comprehensive work on foreign language anxiety with the goal to identify and overcome sources of anxiety. In Huang’s research, two empirical studies were conducted to identify such sources.

In the first study, 419 freshmen students, 47% female and 53% male, from two universities in Beijing participated, 24% of which majored in English. On an open-ended question on the topic of anxiety, 751 individual sources of anxiety were detected and sorted into five major categories according to the source they represent (Huang, 2012, pp. 109-112). The most common source was insufficient English skills (43%). Sufficient English skills are essential for Chinese students of English since students with poor skills will be unable to understand lectures and participate in discussions. It is to be assumed that it is the same case for any students where English is used as the language of instruction, such as in Sweden. The second most common source of anxiety was personal issues (23%). These issues could be for instance lack of self-confidence, general anxiety and shyness and a lack of motivation to learn. Many of the answers related to the participants’ fear of losing face, a fear that Mak (2011, p. 211) has found to be common among Chinese learners of English. The third source of student anxiety was a lack of effective learning strategies (15%). This was a slightly more common source of anxiety among English major students than non-English major students. The fourth largest source of anxiety was teacher factors (12%). The participants reported that teachers who spoke too quickly, were too strict or used poor teaching methods would make them feel anxious. The fifth and final source of anxiety was grading/testing concerns (7%). As reported in 2.1, test anxiety is a common type of anxiety among students that will likely have an impact on their achievements. Huang (2012, p. 112) found that test anxiety did not seem to correlate with either gender or major.

In Huang’s (2012) second study, the subjects were 436 freshmen students, all of whom majored in a foreign language. The most common major was English, 39% of the students, followed by “non-Western languages, such as Japanese, Korean and Arabic at 35% and other Western languages” at 26% (Huang, 2012, p. 116-117). 78% of the subjects were female and 22% were male. The same questionnaire as in the first study was used. This study found 803 individual sources of anxiety, which
were sorted and categorised, each category representing a major source. Huang (2012, p. 113) identified six major sources, the most frequently mentioned source of anxiety being insufficient foreign language skills (32%). The second largest was personal issues (26%). The third was, as in the first study, lack of effective learning strategies (16%). The fourth source was teacher factors (14%) The fifth major source of anxiety, which did not occur in the first study, was difficulty in the foreign language (7%). These difficulties seemed to be connected to the difference between the L1 and the target language. Students answered that the target language was “too complicated,” “too hard to learn” and so forth. The last source category was poor attitude towards learning (5%) (Huang, 2012, p. 113). The answers in this category indicate that students were lacking motivation and did not fully engage in their studies.

Most of the research done on foreign language anxiety is on university students. However, in an undergraduate case study, 59 Chinese middle school students aged 14-16 took the same FLCAS questionnaire as used by Liu (2006) and 20 of them participated in two group interviews (Landström, 2015). 60% of the students suffered from moderate to high levels of anxiety and four factors were found to be the main causes of anxiety: teacher related issues, lack of preparation, self-confidence, and test anxiety (Landström, 2015, pp 15-17). Three factors that did not provoke anxiety were also identified: volunteering answers, the sex of the recipient and motivation. Additionally, the students did not feel tenser during English classes than during other classes (Landström, 2015, p. 17). As mentioned above, Huang (2012 p. 109) emphasises that students need to be sufficiently proficient to be able to follow the classes. This was also the case in Landström’s (2015) study where students reported that they became anxious when the teacher spoke too quickly for them to understand, or used new vocabulary which made them fear being left behind. Nevertheless, the students were highly motivated to learn English; they saw great personal gains in being proficient in English as it was seen as a gateway to western culture, a view that was encouraged by their teacher (Landström, 2015 p. 18).

2.4 Students’ responsibility in reducing foreign language anxiety

Huang (2012 p. 124) cites Rubin and Thompson (1994) who mean that if foreign language learners want to be successful in their studies, they should be responsible for their learning. Their responsibility includes, but is not limited to, taking charge of their own learning, creating and taking opportunities to use the language inside and outside the classroom and developing strategies to reduce anxiety (Crookall & Oxford, 1991, p. 141). If students familiarize themselves with the symptoms of foreign language anxiety, they can more easily recognize which types hamper their development and take steps to overcome them. Students can reduce anxiety by studying in small groups, which not only facilitates learning but also strengthens their relationship and increases trust, which in turn decreases anxiety (von Wörde, 2003, p. 11). Crookall and Oxford (1991, p. 147) recommend that students use a “mistake
panel” where the students “collect” errors and award points to the most humorous mistake. This was thought to create a friendly and relaxed environment that lessens the fear of making mistakes. These mistakes can be shared with the teacher who can incorporate them in the lesson plan, which in the end transforms the errors from feared mistakes to fun jokes that help students to learn. Huang et al (2010) studied peer support at a university in Taiwan using 158 students as subjects. Their results show that peer support is an excellent way to reduce foreign language anxiety (Huang et al, 2010, p. 35). A warm and accepting classroom environment with a good relationship between peers as well as between students and teachers was positively correlated with students’ well-being in the language classroom (Huang et al, 2010, p. 36). It is clear that students can take measures to increase their learning potential and decrease their anxiety, but for them to be able to do so, they need to be educated on the issues of anxiety and be introduced to potential remedies. That responsibility falls on the teacher.

2.5 The influence of teachers' anxiety-reducing strategies on learners' foreign language anxiety

Casado and Dereshiwsky (2001) studied two groups of Spanish learners at Northern Arizona University. The first group, 114 students, was studied during the third week of their first-year Spanish class. The second group, 169 students, was studied during the last three weeks of their second-year Spanish Class. The purpose was to identify and compare the students’ anxiety during foreign language learning, according to the FLCAS. Their results indicate a slight increase in anxiety as the students progress to second year Spanish. The higher anxiety levels are explained by more complex grammar and that the teachers speak Spanish more frequently during class (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001, p. 542). The gap between the students’ actual proficiency and their desired proficiency seems to increase as they progress in their learning; they become more aware of how much they need to learn to become proficient users of the target language. Casado and Dereshiwsky (2001, p. 543) recommend the following methods to alleviate anxiety:

- make students aware that learning a language and becoming proficient takes years of learning
- provide positive reinforcement to students
- create a relaxed classroom environment
- provide out-of-class assistance to students who suffer from anxiety
- explain grammar in L1
- aid students in forming support groups where they can assist each other
- keep the classes small to make it easier to spot anxious students and help them
More generally, it is recommended that teachers work to minimize students’ apathy towards learning. This can be done by providing meaningful contexts of learning that are useful for the students’ future use of the language (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001 p. 543). Engaged students are reasonably more eager to learn and less affected by anxiety.

With the notion that anxiety exerts negative effects on language learning, Alrabai (2015) examined the influence of teachers’ anxiety-reducing strategies on learners’ foreign language anxiety. The setting was English learning in Saudi Arabia and the purpose was to establish the effects, if any, of anxiety reducing strategies. The study consisted of two stages, one to empirically identify sources of foreign language anxiety and a second to establish whether anxiety reducing strategies had a positive effect on anxiety levels. In the first stage, 596 students from four schools participated and 468 students and 12 teachers participated in the second stage. All of the participants studied English, at levels ranging from beginner to advanced, and the L1 of all participants was Arabic. The FLCAS questionnaire, as developed by Horwitz et al (1986), was used in both stages of the study, first to identify sources and levels of anxiety and later, in the second stage, to measure levels before and after intervention. Results from the first stage show that a majority of the participants suffered from moderately high levels of anxiety (Alrabai, 2015, p. 175). This is in line with previous studies on Saudi learners of English in identifying fear of negative evaluation as the most anxiety-provoking factor (Alrabai, 2015 p. 181). To measure the effects of anxiety reducing strategies, Alrabai (2015) conducted an eight-week intervention in the experiment group, consisting of 236 students. There was also a control group (232 students) that did not receive any intervention. During the intervention period, the teachers employed the following seven anxiety-reducing strategies, based on previous research and results from stage one. The strategies are presented below.

- Demonstrate proper teaching behaviour to your students. (Alrabai, 2015, p. 173)
  The teachers were to make sure that they showed passion and interest in teaching English and the students’ progress. They were also friendly, caring and patient with the students. This was meant to create a close relationship between teachers and students.

- Reduce learner communication apprehension. (Alrabai, 2015, p. 173)
  In this approach, the teachers gave the students more opportunities to practice their oral performance, allowed students to use self-talk before presenting and helped them pay special attention to anxiety-provoking situations before they needed to talk in the classroom. With these tools the students were able to prepare themselves better and feel more secure in their performance.

- Reduce the fear of negative evaluation in learners. (Alrabai, 2015, p. 173)
  By helping students to concentrate on the task at hand, rather than the following evaluation, the teachers encouraged students to work thoroughly with the assignment rather than fearing a bad result. Furthermore, they also provided continuous feedback without explicitly putting the students in
situations where they might lose face, so that they could learn from their mistakes more easily in a less anxiety-provoking manner.

- Reduce the fear of language testing in learners. (Alrabai, 2015, p. 173)

To do this the teachers clarified to the students what was being tested, made sure that it corresponded to what had been taught and what was being graded. Students were also given practice tests, to prepare them for the actual test. Tests were also made less difficult and they were given more time to complete the tests.

- Properly address anxiety-provoking beliefs and misconceptions. (Alrabai, 2015, p. 173)

Students were taught to identify what made them anxious and to discuss ways to cope with and reduce a number of these situations. The teachers also talked about foreign language anxiety with the students, making them aware of the phenomenon and its symptoms.

- Help students establish specific and realistic goals for learning English. (Alrabai, 2015, p. 173)

By helping students find clear, reasonable, and meaningful goals with learning English and helping them find ways to attain these goals, the students could find motivation to learn English. Increase students’ self-confidence (Alrabai, 2015, p. 173).

The students were positively reinforced by the teachers, which made them believe in themselves and showed that the teachers believed in them. They were also given help to achieve their goals and their effort was recognized through positive feedback, praise, or awards.

During a pre-intervention examination, Alrabai (2015, p. 177) discovered no significant differences between the levels of anxiety of the student groups. However, after the eight-week period, the results showed that in the intervention group, foreign language anxiety had been significantly reduced and that self-confidence had been significantly increased (Alrabai, 2015, p. 180). Results from the control group show the opposite effect with increased anxiety and decreased self-confidence (Alrabai, 2015, p. 180). All of the anxiety-reducing strategies used in the intervention group had significant effect on student anxiety and the source that displayed the largest difference between the groups was fear of negative evaluation (Alrabai, 2015, p. 181). To conclude, Alrabai (2015, p. 183) recommends Saudi teachers of English to include the strategies used in this study in their teaching in order to reduce anxiety-levels and increase student well-being and performance. Alrabai (2015, p. 184) points out that the Saudi English classroom frequently contains instances of aggressive criticism, public comparison of grades, encouraged competition between students and overcrowded rooms. Consequently, the Saudi teaching environment may differ from the Swedish one and some of the strategies employed in the study would not have similar effects in a Swedish classroom.
3. Methods

There has been little previous research on foreign language anxiety among Swedish students. This study focuses on the foreign language anxiety of two groups of Swedish students. By using both a quantitative and a qualitative approach, the aim is to gain insight into not only possible sources and levels of anxiety but also the views on anxiety among some Swedish students.

3.1 Subjects

The subjects in the present study were 49 Swedish students from two different schools, one class per school, one in mandatory lower secondary school and one in voluntary upper secondary school. 23 of the students belonged to the lower secondary group (group-lower), their age ranging from 12-14. 26 students belonged to the upper secondary group (group-upper) and their age ranged from 15-17. Both schools were situated in mid-west Sweden in two different towns. Because of a low number of girls in the classes, there was no record of gender. Overall, English proficiency seems to be at a high level at these schools, at least when based on the results of the students graduating three years earlier, in 2013, who all managed at least a pass (E) in English (Skolinspektionen, 2014). At a national level the figure was 92.6% (Skolinspektionen, 2014). This may affect the results of the study, as high proficiency may result in low anxiety (see Aida, 1994; Alrabai, 2015; Huang, 2012; von Wörde, 2003).

3.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Appendix) was based on the foreign language classroom anxiety scale (FLCAS) questionnaire but adapted to suit the study and the Swedish setting. It was answered on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from “I totally disagree”, “I somewhat disagree”, “I somewhat agree” to “I totally agree”. Instead of the original 33 statements, the adapted form used in the present study had 28 statements. Out of these, 19 were negative and eight were positive. The positive statements were reversed when compiling the data to allow a scoring system to measure anxiety. Each answer to a statement in the questionnaire gave points as follows, “I totally disagree” (1), “I somewhat disagree” (2), “I somewhat agree” (3) and “I totally agree” (4). A subject’s total points were combined to a score, the higher the score, the higher the perceived anxiety. The maximum total score was 112 and the lowest possible score was 28. The neutral mean was 56. Students who score above 56 are therefore considered anxious in this study. Mak (2011) and Landström (2015) use similar methods to determine a cut-off point. The points were also used to calculate a mean score for each individual statement. For example, a score of 59, when divided by the number of subjects in group-upper, 26, gives the mean score of 2.3, indicating that the subjects generally disagree slightly with a statement.
To find the sources of anxiety the statements were grouped together into categories. The categories were constructed by combining statements that are linked to components of foreign language anxiety. The categories used were fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, teacher-induced anxiety, general anxiety (which encompasses other aspects of anxiety such as self-perception, beliefs, and feelings), attitude towards the English language and test anxiety. Statements 2, 4, 14, 15, 21 and 27 were related to fear of negative evaluation. Statements 1, 3, 10, 12 and 23 were related to communication apprehension. Statements 5, 16, 18, 22 and 28 were related to teacher-induced anxiety. Statements 7, 8 and 13 were related to general anxiety. Statements 6, 11, 25 and 26 were related to attitude towards the English language. Statements 9 and 20 were related to test anxiety. Statements 17, 19 and 24 were not related to any source of anxiety, but to avoidance due to anxiety. (See the Appendix for the full questionnaire.)

The questionnaire was written in Swedish and Swedish was spoken during the administration of the questionnaire to the participants to ensure that all students clearly understood what was expected of them. For both participating classes, the questionnaire was administered during an English lesson. The questionnaire was filled in via an online tool and the subjects used their phones and computers to complete it. Both the teacher and the researcher remained in the classroom while the students completed the questionnaire to be available to answer questions, while taking care to not look at the subjects’ answers.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and explicitly told that any participation was voluntarily and that they could opt out at any time. All students in both classes chose to participate. In the upper secondary school group (group-upper) 26 students out of 29 were present and participated. In the lower secondary school group (group-lower) 23 students out of 26 were present and participated.

3.3 Interviews

Ten students were interviewed, four from group-lower and six from group-upper. Two students from group-lower were interviewed individually and two were interviewed together. From group-upper, four were interviewed in pairs and two were interviewed individually. The reason for interviewing some students in pairs was partly because the participants requested it and partly due to time restrictions. The pairs had an easier time discussing and seemed to feel more at ease, but there is a risk that thoughts and feelings were suppressed by the other party. The interview consisted of both open and closed questions. The advantage of the open questions was that they revealed what the respondents thought was important and encouraged them to be more detailed (Stewart & Cash, 2014, p. 48). They also made the respondents feel more at ease as they communicate trust in the capability of the respondents (Stewart & Cash, 2014, p. 48). The closed questions were used for more basic
information, since such questions are less time-consuming when the aim is to arrive at specific answers. The interview questions were created based on the data gathered by the questionnaire and focused on the topics that created the most anxiety among the two student groups. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that the questions that were going to be used were all included in an interview guide while it was still possible to ask follow-up questions to probe interesting notions. Such an approach allows for freedom to adapt to each interviewee while still being easier to replicate than an unstructured interview. Another advantage is that there is no pressure on the researcher to invent questions on the spot as they are planned beforehand and similar in all interviews. The downside compared to a structured interview, where there is no option to adapt to interviewees and the guide is followed to the letter, is that the interviews may end up with different foci (Stewart & Cash Jr, 2014, p. 73). However, as this study focuses on the students’ own perception of anxiety and their attitude towards English, it was deemed more important to allow for adaptation. Swedish was spoken during the interviews.

To find volunteers for the interviews, all students were given a blank paper during the class when the questionnaire was administrated. They were all instructed to hand back the paper, but those that wished to be interviewed were to write their name on it. This was done to reduce the risk of anyone feeling pressured to participate, or to not participate. Eleven students, four from group-lower and seven from group-upper agreed to volunteer and wrote their names. One participant from group-upper later declined to participate. The interviews took place during break periods for the participants from group-lower and during lesson time for those from group-upper. This was due to the fact that the students in group-upper had no particular assignments in their class at the time of the interviews, as the national speaking test occupied their teacher and the term was coming to an end. The duration of the interviews ranged from 10 minutes to 16 minutes, the pair interviews being the longest. In group-upper, all six participants were, according to their teacher, high-performing students with above average grade projections. As mentioned earlier, performance correlates negatively with foreign language anxiety in some studies, which may affect the results of the interviews. In group-lower, two out of four students were, according to their teacher, low performers and had below average grade prognoses and one student was a high performer with an above average grade projection. The fourth student was expected, by the teacher, to receive an average grade. Because there is a relationship between anxiety and language proficiency (Aida, 1994; Alrabai, 2015; Huang, 2012; von Wörde, 2003), it is reasonable to assume that the subjects’ level of proficiency may affect their perception of anxiety. All interview participants were given a pseudonym. The six students from group-upper are, in this study, called: Henry-GU, Henriette-GU, Harrison-GU, Hanna-GU, Hollie-GU, and Harvey-GU. The four students from group-lower are, in this study, called: Hilary-GL, Logan-GL, Leah-GL, and Andy-GL. The initial letter of the name reveals the subject’s grade prognosis, i.e. Henry=high Andy=average and Leah=low.
3.4 Ethics

All subjects in this study were informed that their participation was voluntary and that there would be no effects of not wanting to take part. Furthermore, they were assured that their participation was anonymous and that no data could be traced back to them. No personal information, such as age or gender, was asked for in the questionnaire. The gender distribution was uneven and the combination of age, gender and proficiency level would put the subjects’ anonymity at risk. Because the subjects were students and might fear that their answers could affect their grades, it was important to ensure their anonymity. For the subjects who were interviewed, anonymity to the researcher was no longer an option. However, they were ensured that they could opt out at any time and that they would remain anonymous in the study.

4. Results and analysis

In section 4.1, the two combined groups’ (CG) quantitative data will be presented along with the factors that were found to cause the most anxiety. The results from group-lower (GL) and group-upper (GU) will also be compared. In section 4.2, the qualitative data from the interviews will be presented and comparisons with the quantitative data will be made.

4.1 Quantitative data

This section gives an overview of the levels of anxiety among the subjects based on their score on the questionnaire. The scoring system, as described in the methods section, awarded 1-4 points for each statement. The maximum mean score an anxiety source could receive was four which would mean that its components caused anxiety among all subjects. A subject’s total score indicates the level of anxiousness; the higher the score, the more anxious the subject. In Figure 1, the total score for each subject is displayed. The mean score among all subjects was 55.3, just below the neutral mean, 56. The highest possible score was 112 and the lowest possible was 28. Students who had a total score of above 56 are considered anxious.
As shown in Figure 1, 19 out of the 49 subjects (39%) scored higher than 56 and may be considered anxious. The number of anxious students is lower than that of previous research cited in this study. As mentioned in section 2.3, Mak (2011), Liu (2006) and Landström (2015) found that about 60% of their subjects were anxious. While there is no established cut-off point for very anxious students, 8 subjects (16%) scored above 70 and can be considered very anxious. There are some outliers in the sample, one student scoring 103 and another scoring 96. These students are considered very anxious. On the other end of the spectrum there are some low scoring students who scored less than 40 and are probably only anxious in particular situations.

When looking at the data from the questionnaire, two statements stand out as being the most anxiety-provoking ones with a mean score of 2.5. The first one is number eight, “It always feels as if other students are better at English than me.” 19 of the subjects partly agreed that they felt that other students were better than them at English and 12 fully agreed. The second one is number 28, “I become nervous when the English teacher asks me questions without my volunteering an answer”. 22 of the 48 subjects partly agreed to the statement, indicating that they get nervous sometimes, but not all the time. Seven fully agreed to the statement, which means that they tend to become nervous when the teachers ask them a question. If they become nervous when asked a question they are likely to try to avoid the attention of the teacher. A student who actively avoids the attention of the teacher is less likely to receive the guidance s/he needs to become more proficient in a language.
4.1.1 The most anxiety-provoking factors

The data was categorized according to the system described in the methods section and the three most anxiety-provoking sources of anxiety turned out to be fear of negative evaluation, teacher-induced anxiety, and general anxiety.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of anxiety</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General anxiety which encompasses other aspects of anxiety such as self-perception, beliefs and feelings.</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of negative evaluation</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-induced anxiety</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 Anxiety-provoking sources in CG and their mean score

The mean scores show to which degree the subjects agree, or disagree, with the statements connected to the category. General anxiety was the most anxiety-provoking source (mean score 2.38). One of the factors included in general anxiety is the feeling of having inferior English skills as compared to others in the class, which, as reported above, was the factor that made students the most anxious. Another of those factors was becoming so nervous that the students forget things they normally know. The second most anxiety-provoking source was fear of negative evaluation (mean score 2.21). Worrying about making mistakes in class was one of the factors that were included in fear of negative evaluation and 32 out of 49 subjects reported that they tremble when it is their turn to speak during an English class. Twelve of 49 subjects were afraid of peers laughing at them if they speak English. The third major source of anxiety was teacher-induced anxiety (mean score 2.04). Teachers seem to be causing anxiety when they put unwanted focus on a student. 29 of the 49 subjects become nervous when they are asked questions without being prepared. Eleven students even become angry when they do not fully understand what their teacher means when correcting something they have said. Ten students were afraid of lagging behind in English class because things proceed too quickly for them.

4.1.2 Data from each group presented separately

In group-lower (GL) the average anxiety score was 55. Ten out of 23 subjects, 43%, scored above 56 and are considered anxious. Four students, 17%, scored above 70 are considered very anxious.
As Figure 3 shows, one subject scored 103 and can be considered extremely anxious. One of the few things that did not cause anxiety for this particular student was the gender of the person s/he was talking to. A student that is extremely anxious is less likely to be an active participant in class and may miss out on opportunities to practice the target language. This particular student needs help to overcome his/her anxiety in order to be a more effective learner.

The two least anxious students scored 38, which indicates that they feel at ease in the classroom at most times. Two statements were found to be more anxiety-causing than the rest and they were: “I worry about making mistakes during English class” and “I feel nervous when I am asked a question by the teacher without indicating that I am prepared.” 14 out of the 23 students in GL found such situations disturbing.

Figure 4 Anxiety-provoking sources and their mean score in GL
As can be seen in Figure 4, the same sources of anxiety proved to be the most anxiety-provoking in group-lower as in the combined groups (cf. Fig 2). Figure 4 shows that just as in the combined group (CG) general anxiety caused the most anxiety (GL: 2.38; CG: 2.40). Fear of negative evaluation followed second (GL: 2.26; CG: 2.21). Teacher-induced anxiety was the third most anxiety-provoking source in group-lower, yet causing more anxiety in that group than in the combined group. (GL: 2.23; CG: 2.04).

Figure 5 Individual anxiety score for subjects in group-upper (GU)

Nine out of 26 subjects in group-upper (GU), 34%, scored above 56 and are considered anxious. The highest individual score in group-upper was 96, which indicates very high anxiety. This student feared speaking in front of others and considered others to be more proficient. However, s/he did not feel anxious about taking tests nor did s/he dread the consequences of failing English class. The least anxious individual scored 37. The most anxiety-provoking activity was talking in class, which made 15 subjects, 57%, tremble. It is remarkable that such a large part of a high performing class claims to be suffering from physical symptoms from anxiety. The second most common source of anxiety was the feeling of being inferior at English when compared to peers, which 14 subjects agreed to being the case.
Just as in the combined group (CG) and group-lower’s (GL) results, it was general anxiety that had the biggest impact on anxiety in GU (GU 2.40; CG 2.38). Fear of negative evaluation followed but with slightly less effect on anxiety than in in CG and GL (GU: 2.17; CG: 2.21). Teacher-induced anxiety was found to be the third most anxiety-provoking factor (GU: 1.89 CG: 2.04). The average scores of fear of negative evaluation and teacher-induced anxiety were slightly lower than those of the combined groups.

To sum up, the three most anxiety-provoking sources in the two groups were general anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and teacher-induced anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation and teacher-induced anxiety tended to provoke slightly more anxiety among students belonging to group-lower than those in group-upper. General anxiety, the largest source of anxiety, was more or less the same in the two groups (GL; 2.38; GU: 2.40).

### 4.2 Interviews

The qualitative data in this study was gathered during interviews with some of the subjects who had participated in the quantitative part of the study. As mentioned in the methods section, six subjects from group-upper and four subjects from group-lower participated in the interviews.

When discussing anxiety, no student in either group considered anxiety a problem, a common comment being “maybe there are some people who are nervous, but I’m not.” As the discussions around English continued and the interviewees spoke more freely, it seemed as though some of them did suffer from anxiety without being aware of it. A reason for this may be that foreign language anxiety is an unknown
concept to most students, and maybe to teachers as well. No one had heard of this concept. Anxiety for them was the sweaty palms that manifest themselves when they prepare to talk in front of the class, not the fear that keeps them silent during oral exercises, or the panic that causes them to black out when someone laughs at their mistake. However, the interviews indicated that some of the students suffered from anxiety and that it affected them in class. It was a factor that kept them from using their target language as much as they could have. They also expressed a feeling of uneasiness that might have a negative effect their attitude towards the English subject and their willingness to participate in class. As mentioned in 3.3, the names of the participants have been changed to ensure their anonymity and their aliases show their grade projections, i.e. Henry=high, Andy=Average and Leah=low.

All interviewees in group-upper said that they enjoyed learning English and that they considered it useful and important for their future career. Another thing they had in common was that they had received and would likely receive high grades in English. For instance, a complaint raised by Hollie-GU, Harvey-GU and Harrison-GU was that they thought their course progressed far too slowly. Harvey-GU said that “it feels like we’re not doing anything at all in class, I haven’t learned anything this year.” In group-lower the four interviewees said it was fun to learn English but only Hilary-GL liked all aspects of it. Leah-GL and Logan-GL did not like the oral part of learning English, while reading and listening were seen as stress free tasks. “It’s [reading and listening] like, more fun, because I understand more” was Leah-GL’s comment when talking about reading and listening. Andy-GL did not feel bothered about anything in particular but he said that he did not enjoy learning English. When discussing speaking in front of peers Leah-GL said “I have always felt that I will panic if someone comments on my mistakes or laughs at my errors – I’m afraid of it.” In sharp contrast, Hilary-GL’s response was “The thing I like most about English is discussions, arguing for or against something. It is fun because I can say what I think about things, but in English.” On the matter of making mistakes she said that “classmates help me if I make mistakes, they’ll like say the correct thing, so that I can repeat it.”

When the subjects compared themselves to their peers their responses were varied. Those who did consider themselves among the best at English in their class said that they did not compare themselves with others nor felt affected by the proficiency of others. However, those who considered themselves mid-level, even though they would likely get a high grade, reported that they often compared themselves with others whom they considered better, which caused them to feel disturbed and anxious. Henry-GU, for instance, said that he would avoid speaking when someone who could give him negative feedback was nearby. When talking about their peers’ reaction to mistakes, the subjects from group-upper did not think that their peers would react very negatively to mistakes when speaking in class. The reason was that they felt safe in class and that they had a friendly environment in the classroom.
“All of us are friends, so it does not really matter” Henriette-GU commented on the matter. This feeling of safety had increased during the school year as group-upper grew to know each other better. In group-lower, Logan-GL and Leah-GL compared themselves with others in their class and felt inferior at English. They claimed that this was because their previous school had not prepared them sufficiently. “The students from other schools are a lot better, so it’s not that easy” Logan-GL said. Leah-GL commented that speaking to the opposite sex is worse than speaking to the same sex, “because like, it feels as if they’re more judging, they always want to be the best, so they’ll drop a comment if I make a mistake, to prove like, that they’re better.” Andy-GL and Hilary-GL said that they were afraid of negative comments from specific students in their class, the reason being that these specific students often would tease others.

All but Harrison-GU agreed that speaking in front of the class, while doing a presentation or the alike, is anxiety-provoking. However, for the students from group-upper the fact that they are speaking English does not increase their anxiety. “Well – it’s more like – everyone is watching you and you have to be correct, it does not matter if it’s Swedish, history or English.” Henriette-GU said. When they do feel that extra bit of anxiety as they prepare their oral presentation, they agreed that their English will suffer slightly, but as the anxiety passes and they get into the role of a presenter, the problem ceases. Harvey-GU said that he had no problems presenting in front of the class, neither in English nor in Swedish. The subjects from group-lower felt differently about presenting in English, perhaps because they had not had much practice in doing so. They had not yet done a presentation in their class. Logan-GL said that “I would never present in front of the class, I just can’t do it and I don’t know what to say.”

Speaking to a native speaker of English was seen as a daunting task by four out of the ten interviewees. Hilary-GL, Logan-GL, Leah-GL, and Hanna-GU all said that they would feel more nervous interacting with a native English speaker than with a non-native speaker. The reason was that the native speaker would be so much superior to themselves. Logan-GL described it as “because they know so much, they can tell every single mistake I make so I want to speak perfectly and then I don’t know what to say.” When speaking to a non-native speaker he imagined that it would be easier to use strategies to overcome communication problems, such as negotiating for meaning.

When asked about their teacher’s role in making English interesting, approachable, relevant, and anxiety-free, the subjects from group-upper all thought that their current teacher did not have any significant impact on either their English skills or their interest in English. Harvey-GU, Harrison-GU and Hollie-GU even claimed that their teacher had lessened their interest in English as a subject in school. Their complaints regarded the slow progress of the subject and a lack of purpose and structure.
The subjects from group-lower said that their teacher had made English more fun than previously. The use of games, such as Kahoot, to make the lesson more exciting was greatly appreciated by the students. By making English interesting and approachable the teacher of group-lower had made the students more eager to learn, which may help them overcome their anxiety issues. Both Leah-GL and Logan-GL dedicated free time to improving their English as they wished to be more proficient in English. The teacher in group-upper, on the other hand, had been unable to keep the students’ interest up, which may lead to them spending less time with their English studies.

During the discussion on how to work to reduce stress and anxiety when learning English, eight of the ten subjects recommended small groups. They feel safer in small groups where they can help each other more easily without there being too much pressure on any one person. Nevertheless, there was the fear that if they got into a group where everyone else was better it might cause them to feel awkward and avoid speaking. Harrison-GU, Logan-GL, and Leah-GL all pointed out that the teacher needs to know who can work with whom for groups to function well. Six of the interviewees emphasized the need for a friendly classroom environment. They also pointed out that they liked it when the teacher was able to convey gently that a mistake had been made, without putting too much emphasis on it. Hilary-GU spoke about not putting too much stress on the students: “[the teacher] should not give too much homework, because that stresses people and then they avoid doing it. I’m like that, I panic when I have too much to do.”

When talking about the concept of foreign language anxiety, all interviewees made it clear that they had not heard of the concept before. When the concept was explained, they could understand and relate to it. At first, it was hard for them to see how anxiety could have an effect on a learner’s success. When they were given examples of how foreign language anxiety could manifest itself, everyone agreed that it is something that they wished they would have known about before. Hanna-GL said “I thought it was a part of learning English to be nervous.” If they had been informed about foreign language anxiety, measures could have been taken to reduce its effects. For instance, the low achieving students, Leah-GL, and Logan-GL, both expressed that they wished they dared to be more active during their English lessons to learn more.

It is clear that there was a difference in the perceived anxiety between the two interview groups in this study. Logan-GL and Leah-GL were far more nervous than their peers and the students in group-upper. It is easy to assume that the difference is due to their different proficiency levels. Nevertheless, the interviews showed that even the high performing students were affected by anxiety and avoided putting themselves in situations that were thought of as anxiety-provoking. By avoiding anxiety-provoking situations they are also avoiding using their target language. This may in turn have negative effects on
their learning. Because of the low number of interviewees, it is impossible to generalize the conclusions, but the data indicate that while high proficiency may reduce anxiety, it does not remove the effect of foreign language anxiety.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of the study was fourfold; firstly, to identify major sources of anxiety, secondly, to identify differences between lower and upper secondary students, thirdly, to gain an understanding of students’ perception of foreign language anxiety and fourthly, to examine which measures students would recommend to reduce anxiety.

Three major sources of anxiety were identified: fear of negative evaluation, teacher-induced anxiety, and general anxiety. All three sources were found in both groups. Group-lower (GL) was slightly more affected by fear of negative evaluation and teacher-induced anxiety than group-upper (GU). The difference was very small. Their fear of negative evaluation may be related to the fact that the students in lower secondary school have less experience of getting grades. They are also younger and may be at a more sensitive age. In the Swedish school system, students receive grades from year six and onwards. GL was approaching the end of their seventh year, and would be getting their second set of grades at the time of the study. GU, on the other hand, had had more time to get accustomed to being evaluated and graded. Teacher-induced anxiety may originate from similar causes. In the transition from primary school to lower secondary school the student–teacher role changes. In most primary schools, each class has one main teacher and a few additional ones for some subjects. In the lower secondary school and onwards, the number of teachers increases as the subjects become more complex. The student–teacher relationship in the lower secondary school may therefore be more impersonal and authoritative, which may take the students some time to get used to. A teacher is supposed to guide and help students through the learning process. S/he also needs to assess students’ weaknesses so that they can be remedied. But a teacher is also supposed to grade students and a grade may affect a student’s entire future. This dual relationship of both a guiding mentor and a summarizing grader can lead to a situation where the students may be afraid to expose their lack of knowledge. There is also the aspect that whoever is the teacher’s centre of attention also becomes the centre of attention of the class. Of course, only two teachers were studied in this study and the results may be a product of different teaching methods. The upper secondary students have also spent more time learning English and are, probably, more proficient in the language. While proficiency does not seem to remove anxiety, it does seem to lessen its effects. The low proficiency students in group-lower, Leah-GL and Logan-GL, were noticeably more anxious about English than the other, more proficient, interviewees. Andy-
GL, the only average proficiency student, was not very anxious, just like Hilary-GL. Both Leah-GL and Logan-GL reported that they avoided specific anxiety-provoking tasks, such as speaking in class. A reasonable assumption is that students who avoid using English may feel more anxious than those who frequently use English, when they are confronted with an assignment they have to complete.

Compared to previous studies of foreign language anxiety, the major sources of anxiety were similar to those of Mak (2011) and Alrabai (2015). However, the percentage of anxious students was lower than in studies on Chinese students. Mak (2011) and Landström (2015) found that about 60% of their samples suffered from anxiety based on their questionnaire results. In this study, 49% of GL were found to be anxious and 36% of GU. Because of the lack of Swedish studies on foreign language anxiety, there are no Swedish studies to compare the results to. There are two plausible reasons for the lower levels of anxiety among Swedish learners of English. The first is that Swedish and English belong to the same language family and are more closely related than English and Chinese. The second is that the cultural connection between Sweden and the English-speaking world is closer than that of China and the English-speaking world. Sweden belongs to the western world and western culture, often in the English language, is an integral part of Swedish society. Swedish learners of English are more frequently and naturally exposed to English than their Chinese counterparts.

The interviewees’ knowledge about the concept of foreign language anxiety turned out to be non-existent, and anxiety was seen as a normal part of learning English in school. However, when it was explained to them they could relate to foreign language anxiety. While there has been extensive research in the area, it seems as though it is still an unknown concept in actual teaching environments. It is clear that the schools in this study have failed to inform students about foreign language anxiety, its causes, and remedies. If the students are not made aware of the issue, there is little chance that they may strategically work to reduce anxiety. To reduce anxiety, the subjects suggested working in small groups where they feel safer. They asked for a friendly classroom environment when not working in small groups. It seemed to be important not to be judged by others.

This study shows that foreign language anxiety is prevalent among Swedish learners of English in both lower and upper secondary education. However, in the classes studied it was lower at the higher levels of education. It also shows that the students do not always realize that it is the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety that disturbs or makes them hesitate before speaking in class. If students are to become proficient users of a language, they need to be able to practice it without being afraid of being laughed at. Students who are willing to use the target language in class are bound to learn more and feel more confident in their language use.
To help students become aware of foreign language anxiety, teachers need to explicitly discuss the concept and incorporate anxiety-reducing strategies, such as those recommended by Alrabai (2015), in their teaching methodology. More research is needed to find generic causes of anxiety in the Swedish setting. The cultural aspect of what causes shame and what makes a person anxious is important to consider when discussing foreign language anxiety. Future research on the topic could examine strategies, such as those presented by Alrabai (2015), to find out which ones would work in the Swedish school environment. These strategies could be used to reduce anxiety and increase proficiency among students. If implemented it could also increase the wellbeing of the students as they would not be as stressed about their language classes.
References


Appendix, Questionnaire

Enkät om språkängslan

Din medverkan är helt frivilligt och du kan när som helst välja att avbryta ditt deltagande.


Nedan ska du kryssa i den ruta som stämmer bäst överens med hur du tycker eller känner om varje påstående. Siffrorna har följande betydelse:
1= Stämmer inte alls. 2=Stämmer inte helt och hållet. 3. Stämmer litet grand. 4=Stämmer helt och hållet.

1. Jag känner mig själv säker när jag pratar engelska i klassrummet.
1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

2. Jag oroar mig över att göra misstag på engelsklektionen.
1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

3. Jag blir nervös när jag ska prata engelska med någon av det motsatta könet.
1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

4. Jag blir skakig när jag vet att det är min tur att prata på engelsklektionen.
1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

5. Jag blir orolig när jag inte förstår vad läraren säger när hen pratar engelska.
1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

7. På engelsklektionerna tänker jag ofta på saker som inte har med lektionen att göra.
1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

8. Det känns alltid som att andra elever är bättre på engelska än jag.
1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □

10. Jag tycker inte att det är jobbigt att prata engelska på lektionerna.
1 □  2 □  3 □  4 □
11. Jag är orolig för konsekvenserna av att inte få godkänt i engelska.

12. Om jag är väl förberedd känns det inte svårt att prata engelska på lektionerna.

13. På engelsklektionerna kan jag bli så nervös att jag glömer bort saker som jag egentligen kan.


15. Jag skulle inte vara nervös ifall jag pratade engelska med någon som har det som modersmål.


17. Även när jag är väl förberedd inför engelsklektionerna brukar jag känna mig nervös.

18. Det känns inte alls jobbigt när läraren påpekar de fel som jag gör.

19. Jag känner ofta att jag inte vill gå på engelsklektionerna.


22. Det går så fort på engelsklektionerna att jag är rädd för att hamna efter.

23. Jag blir nervös och förvirrad när jag pratar engelska på engelsklektionerna.

24. När jag är på väg till min engelsklektion känner jag mig stressad och orolig.

25. Jag känner mig överväldigad av alla regler jag måste lära om det engelska språket.


27. Jag är rädd att de andra eleverna ska skratta åt mig när jag pratar engelska.