



HÖGSKOLAN
I GÄVLE

AKADEMIN FÖR UTBILDNING OCH EKONOMI
Avdelningen för humaniora

Communication Strategies in Speaking English as a Foreign Language

In the Swedish 9th grade national test setting

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August 2011

C - Essay, 15 credits

English Linguistics

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Abstract

Keywords: second language acquisition, communication strategies, oral production, ESL instruction

Speaking a foreign language is a major part of communicating in that language. Since LGY 69, spoken English has received the same attention in teaching as the writing of English; and in the national tests today spoken English is considered 1/5 of the test grade. However, students in many cases find it more difficult to speak English than to write it and some teachers still focus more on writing and grammar than on speaking.

In this essay I am trying to show how a group of fairly fluent students tackle the oral part of their national test and what strategies they use to overcome linguistic difficulties. In order to do so I have filmed five groups and a total number of 17 students when they do the oral part of their national tests in English in grade nine and also have the students fill out a questionnaire about the experience. The tests took place in March and April 2010.

This essay shows that the most frequently used strategy is pauses, unfilled and filled, but that for other strategies the individual differences are great. It also shows that group dynamics play an important role when doing the test and students who are not able to do the test with people they normally talk to do worse in the test setting and that the performance of both boys and girls suffer when being put in mixed groups.

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1. Introduction

I have worked as a middle school teacher for eight years now at the same school and I have had the opportunity to follow a large number of students through their English progression from sixth grade to ninth grade. The students at our school are divided into groups according to their proficiency level in English and the group I have been teaching for the last year and have chosen to study is one of the top groups (there is one more group above this one and three groups below) which means that all students should be fairly good at English. One thing that I have noted is that students in general are hesitant to speak English, even if their skills in reading, listening and writing indicate that they should have the ability to perform as well in speaking. In the classroom, exercises in oral communication are frequent and in addition, the students are instructed to speak English at all times, but they constantly have to be reminded to do so and some students speak Swedish all the time whereas others tend to switch to Swedish when things get complicated. No wonder then that fear of the oral part of the national test manifests itself early and in some students this fear is very strong. In order to relieve some of this stress, students are encouraged to practice their speaking skills in the classroom but they are unwilling to do so, claiming that it feels awkward to speak English to their Swedish friends. It is also sometimes difficult, in my experience, to get any help from their parents in this matter since there still seems to be a misconception among some parents and students alike, that speaking English is not as important as writing, reading and listening, even if this assumption has changed in later years with the internationalization of the world.

1.2 Aim and Scope

My aim in this study is to examine what strategies the students use during the oral part of the national test in English in order to understand how teachers can help the students to do their best. I am also trying to show how a group of students who are rather fluent in English overcome linguistic difficulties when speaking English.

The national test in English in grade nine consists of four parts namely listening skills, reading skills, writing skills and speaking skills. The listening, reading and writing parts usually go very well for most students and many of them perform better on these tests than they do ordinarily in the classroom, probably because they learn a lot of English outside the classroom which the teacher has no control over, and when they focus better, like on the national tests, they are able to show these acquired skills. The speaking part however creates much stress among the students and many of them get lower results on these tests than they do generally. I have decided to look at different strategies that students use when they have to speak English, but also to have a look at what effect the group constellations have on the

students' performances. What I hope to achieve is an understanding for what the students go through. I can hopefully use this knowledge in the classroom when preparing the students in the future and maybe to pass on some of that understanding to my colleagues so that even their future students may benefit from it.

1.2 Background

In 1807, it became possible to study English in Swedish schools, but its status was low. The dominating languages in schools were French, German, Latin and Greek. In the 1920s English was considered equal to languages like German and French and with the end of WW II German became less popular while English gained in popularity. From the fall of 1946 English was introduced as the first foreign language to be learned in Swedish schools. When "grundskolan", the Swedish primary school, was established in 1962 English became compulsory and French and German were choices (Flodin 2008). Also in 1962, standardized tests in English were introduced which were replaced in 1994 by national tests. In the beginning, the focus of English studies was on the written language which is still the case in many countries today. In LGY 69, however, it was stressed that the spoken language should receive the same attention as the written language and since then Sweden is considered one of the best countries in the world when it comes to speaking English. Most of us who were in school during the 1970's and 1980's remember the language labs where you would practice English pronunciation individually supervised by your teacher. Since LPO 94 the national tests in English include a speaking part. The speaking part is today to be regarded as one fifth of the total test grade.

When learning a foreign language, the language input that you receive has for a long time been regarded as a very important part of learning the new language. Some studies, for example Hart and Risley (1995), have looked at children acquiring their native language and noticed that the quality of the language input the children get from their parents had a life-long impact on the language skills of those children. This work was followed up by Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman and Levine (2002) who showed that teachers in classrooms could improve the students' language skills by using a more complex speech. It was even suggested that children should develop oral skills before learning how to read and write the language and that if a student only had enough quality input from the language they would automatically perform quality output. Recently however language output in itself has been regarded as an important part of second-language learning. Language output is often used to assess what the children have learned like in answers to questions from the teacher

either oral or written. But language output has recently been looked at as a learning process in its own right, where students test their output skills and learn from the feedback they get. Van Patten (2003) talks about two processes in language output, access and production strategies. First the student has to search his memory for the vocabulary he needs and the student has to make an effort to put the words together in a grammatically correct sentence. This requires a large effort from the student since the process is not yet automated. A study by Swain (2005) showed that even if students of a second language receive a lot of good input their speaking and writing skills were still not as good as those students who had the language as their native tongue. It has since been suggested that trying to produce the second language in speaking and writing is essential to learning to use the language. Swain also suggested that the students, when trying to produce the second language, realize from the feedback they get what additional information they need.

According to Nakatani (2006) communication strategies can be divided in two types: Achievement or compensatory strategies where a student tries different solutions in order to achieve working communication, and reduction or avoidance strategies where a student gives up when the first attempt on communication fails, the former strategy being more successful for the student. Through the use of questionnaires in a group of Japanese university students their “strategies for coping with speaking problems during communicative tasks”, (Nakatani 2006, p. 154) were examined and eight factors were distinguished. The first factor or “The Social Affective Factor” contained students who do not appear nervous and avoid pauses in order to give a nice appearance and they are not too worried about mistakes. The second factor or “The Fluency-Oriented Factor” contained students who listen a lot to the sound of the language and imitate it in order to make their speech clearer and easier to understand. They also take their time to speak so that they do not say things that are inappropriate in the context. The third factor or “The Negotiation for Meaning While Speaking Factor” contained students who need the people they speak with because they look to them all the time and repeat and rephrase until the listeners understand what they mean. The fourth factor or “The Accuracy-Oriented Factor” contained students who are very concerned about using the proper forms and who self-correct in order to achieve grammatical correctness. Factor five or “The Message Reduction and Alteration Factor” included students who, when they can not express something, change it into an easier expression in order to keep communication going if their first attempt was not understood. Factor six or “The Nonverbal Strategies While Speaking Factor” included students who use nonverbal expressions such as gestures or facial expressions in order to help the listener understand what

they are trying to say. Factor seven or “The Message Abandonment Factor” includes students who, when the first attempt of communication fails, give up trying or let others continue. The eighth and last factor or “The Attempt to Think in English Factor” include students who try to think in English instead of making up the sentences in their native tongue and then translate them into English. Corresponding strategies were found in the listening part of the conversation. In testing the use of the different strategies Nakatani found that the high oral proficiency students tended to make more use of the Social affective strategies, fluency-oriented strategies and negotiation for meaning while speaking strategies while the low oral proficiency students used Message abandonment strategies and Less active listener strategies more (Nakatani 2006).

Jasone Cenoz (1998) has investigated the use of pauses as a strategy in foreign language production. Pauses and hesitation have been regarded as a problem when speaking a second language but according to Cenoz pauses can have several functions

1. to allow the speaker to breathe
2. to allow the speaker to plan his speech
3. to mark demarcations in the speech

Pauses can also be used to hand over the turn to another speaker. We can easily distinguish two types of pauses, silent pauses and pauses filled by *mm*, *ah*, *er* etc. and there are different views on what these different types of pauses signify; but they tend to occur in the same positions. Researchers have also tried to differentiate pauses between phrases from pauses within.

Cenoz (1998) investigated 15 intermediate and advanced learners of English at the University of the Basque Country who had Spanish as their first language in terms of their non-juncture pauses i.e. pauses within sentences. He then looked at “the type of pauses (silent or filled), the length of the silent pauses, their distribution in the sentence, the hesitation markers used in the case of the filled pauses (*um, eh, ah*) and their association with communication difficulties (self-correction, reformulation, repetition)” (Cenoz 1998, page 4). The result of this investigation was that the students used 1085 non-juncture pauses in total with 64% silent pauses and 36% filled. More than 90 percent of the pauses were two seconds or shorter. Both silent and filled pauses have the same functions as mostly planning pauses and more silent pauses than filled pauses are used when a student has problems finding the right vocabulary. The hesitation phenomena mostly used in the survey were repetition, self correction and reformulation and they are used more together with silent pauses than with filled pauses. In the survey Cenoz also found that high proficiency speakers tend to use more

pauses than low proficiency speakers and they also used more filled pauses. Other hesitation phenomena seemed to be used more in silent pauses but students of low speaking proficiency use more hesitation phenomena in both filled and silent pauses. His conclusion is that there are great differences on the individual level both in the use of pauses and in the preference of what sort of pause to use and that filled pauses repair communication by themselves but that silent pauses often require other methods as well. Students of higher proficiency seem to only need time to retrieve the correct information while students of lower proficiency need to try more options because they tend to use other strategies together with pauses to a greater extent.

In a foreign language that you have not yet reached full control of, analyses of speech suggest that not all learners focus on the same thing. Some students focus on being as accurate as possible, others focus on using a more complex language, thus taking a risk that their language will be less accurate and some focus on speaking as fluently as they can i.e. with as little pauses and hesitation as possible. The reason for this differentiation is, according to for example Skehan (1998b), limitations in our working memories. When we are learning a foreign language and the language structures are not yet automated we have to think about what we say and in this make full use of our working memories in order to recall language structures and grammatical rules to produce correct sentences in the target language. Since the capacity of the working memory is limited both regarding storage capacity and activity we have to limit the amount of processes going on at the same time. This makes it for example very difficult for the student to focus on both learning the language and understanding it at the same time. The process of accessing words and grammatical knowledge from the long term memory and keep it in the short time memory long enough to process them and produce correct sentences is particularly demanding in real time speech where there is little time for planning. Because of this students tend to simplify this process by concentrating on one issue at a time. This is more evident the more of a beginner the student is and it changes over time. Skehan (1998b) talks about exemplar-based and rule-based linguistic systems. Exemplar-based is when a learner learns chunks from a language i.e. idioms, fixed expressions etc. This system does not take much processing to produce and can be accessed rapidly when time is limited. Rule-based is when a learner stores a lot of abstract linguistic rules which can be used to produce good sentences but this system takes a lot of processing and is therefore difficult to use in real time speech. How these two systems are used by learners is still debated by scholars.

Influencing learner output is familiarity with the subject, time for pre-planning, interaction; the learner's mother tongue may make a specific grammatical feature more

difficult and composition of groups. When analyzing learner language syntactical self-corrections can be seen as a way to see how concerned the speaker is with accuracy, whereas lexical self-corrections show more of a concern with the meaning. A lack of self-corrections is also sometimes regarded as a sign of fluency. Tarone uses a similar list of strategies as Nakatani (2006):

Avoidance: Topic avoidance – the speaker tries not to talk about entities for which the desired expression is not known.

Message abandonment – the speaker begins to talk about an entity but is unable to continue.

Paraphrase: Approximation – the speaker uses a simple nominal expression which shares enough features with the intended referential expression to satisfy a listener.

Word coinage – the speaker makes up a new nominal expression to refer to the entity.

Circumlocution – the speaker describes the properties of the entity instead of naming it.

Elaboration: the speaker builds redundancy into the message by means of repetition, paraphrase and explication.

Borrowing: Literal translation – a learner translates word for word from the L1

Language switch – a learner uses an L1 expression without translating.

Appeal for assistance: a speaker asks for the desired referential expression.

Mime: the speaker uses nonverbal expressions.

(Tarone, 1986)

It can also be debated whether avoidance really is a communication strategy since it doesn't help communication. Out of these strategies native speakers are more likely to use circumlocution and approximation (Tarone and Yule 1983) since they require certain basic vocabulary and in the instructions for the national test the students are told to avoid the avoidance and borrowing strategies and try to use the elaboration and paraphrase strategies instead.

2. Method

When I decided to use the oral part of the national test as material for my study the first obstacle I had to overcome was to get the parents' permission to film their children in the testing situation and it was difficult to get the parents to answer the letter I sent. The second obstacle was to get their permission, because some of them were hesitant. They were afraid that the presence of the film camera might have a negative effect on their child's performance on the test. For a while it was very uncertain whether I would have any material at all. But once I had given parents and students a promise that if any of them felt that they performed

worse because of the film camera they would get the chance to redo the test, more and more parents handed in a permission slip. Out of the 26 students registered on the class list, I finally got the permission from 17 students and their parents. Seven students opted to do the test without the film camera present and two students did not do the test at all. I then went on to divide the students into groups of three to four for the purpose of the test, taking into consideration their different proficiency levels and making sure that they were all in groups that they felt comfortable in. There were seven groups altogether and I filmed five of them. Out of the groups that I filmed there were two all girls groups, one all boys group and two mixed groups. The tests took place after their regular school hours so that we would not get disturbed, but we were still interrupted on a couple of occasions by the school janitor coming to check the classrooms before locking the school up for the evening. After the tests were completed, I had the students fill in a questionnaire (appendix 7.1) about their experience. None of the students took the chance to redo the test without the camera present. The conversations were performed according to the instructions from Skolverket.

2.1 Material

The test conversations were between 30 and 45 minutes long and I decided to transcribe the first 15 minutes of each conversation in order to limit my time and the amount of material to investigate. I used the transcription conventions listed in Wood and Kroger (2000, p. 192-194) with some exceptions in that I have focused my attention on the temporal and sequential relationships and not taken in to consideration things like speech delivery and intonation. Pauses are noted with a dot or a number in brackets; a pause of approximately one second would be noted (1) and (.) would be a pause of less than one second. The transcriptions of the five conversations are each between twelve and fifteen pages long. One thing that I noticed fairly quickly is that transcribing speech is very time consuming, but also that our ears are complicated tools. Not only do you have to start all over several times because the specific item you were listening for escaped you, but also that you tend to hear different things at different times. I have transcribed pauses according to their approximate length and rounded them to the nearest second since I did not have access to a sufficient tool for measuring them more exactly, but since most pauses are shorter than two seconds I found it more important to list the amount of pauses instead of their exact length. After having established the amount of pauses within utterances and in between utterances I found it necessary to put the amount of pauses in relation to the students' different amount of speaking time. In order to see how supportive they were of each other I also looked at long and short utterances then divided into

an utterance with only one word and the amount of lines in utterances of two words or more. I have primarily looked at the number of filled and unfilled pauses as well as repetitions and corrections for each student but also other strategies when relevant.

2.2 Data

I have listed the data for each student in a total of three tables. The total amount of filled and unfilled pauses as well as repetitions and corrections is listed in the following table:

Group	Name	Number of unfilled pauses	Number of filled pauses	Number of repetitions	Number of corrections
Group 1	Anna	107	25	42	5
	Linn	147	24	13	10
Group 2	Lisa	78	9	9	4
	Moa	61	9	5	4
	Emelie	36	8	4	2
Group 3	Anton	72	20	12	8
	Lukas	44	13	5	3
	Kristian	35	3	5	5
	Jesper	7	3	1	0
Group 4	Daniel	109	27	5	3
	Linus	45	5	4	1
	Arina	40	3	4	1
	Anja	40	8	2	0
Group 5	Ted	63	12	25	1
	Ludde	57	5	8	1
	Martin	97	14	8	5
	Sonja	19	7	0	0

Table 1: Number of pauses, repetitions and corrections in each group.

In order to get a sense of how much each student is talking during the fifteen minutes I analyzed, I have counted the number of lines with more than two words in the transcript. In addition I have also counted the number of lines with only one word for each student. The majority of one word answers are the words “yeah” or “yes”.

Group	Name	Number of lines	Number of short answers
Group 1	Anna	86	40
	Linn	95	10
Group 2	Lisa	112	51
	Moa	102	36
	Emelie	109	20
Group 3	Anton	90	54
	Lukas	78	27
	Kristian	68	43
	Jesper	7	4
Group 4	Daniel	95	15
	Linus	49	28
	Arina	50	7
	Anja	32	4
Group 5	Ted	68	20
	Ludde	55	7
	Martin	83	18
	Sonja	17	9

Table 2: Amount of longer and shorter answers.

I also decided to look at the number of pauses in between turns and the results are shown in the table below.

Group	Number of pauses in between turns
Group 1: Anna and Linn	31
Group 2: Lisa, Moa and Emelie	95
Group 3: Anton, Lukas, Kristian and Jesper	36
Group 4: Daniel, Linus, Arina and Anja	49
Group 5: Ted, Ludde, Martin and Sonja	61

Table 3: Number of pauses in between turns

3. Results

In this section, the five groups will be presented one by one together with the findings for each group. The three groups with only boys or only girls will be presented first and the mixed groups last

3.1 Group 1 Anna and Linn

Anna and Linn are two girls who are close friends and they socialize outside of school as well as in school. The reason there are only two people in this group is because Sonja was supposed to do her test together with them but she got sick on the occasion and had to join another group much to her dismay. Anna and Linn are throughout the test very comfortable with each other and they do not turn to the teacher for help at any time. They are both very supportive of each other even if Anna seems to take on the main responsibility for keeping the conversation going by asking questions, sometimes about things she already knows, and moving on to the next subject. An example of this is when she asks Linn what she does together with her friends:

58. **Linn:** on my spare time all else I'm with friends (2) I (1) are with friends pretty much

59. **Anna:** what do you do then

60. **Linn:** we can do everything fo- you are one of them so why do you ask?

61. **Anna:** (hah) yes (hah)

Or

25. **Anna:** Do you believe in God?

Anna is also very supportive when Linn is speaking and she constantly fills in yes and other supportive comments. She is one of the four people in the study with the largest number of short answers in total. Both girls also seem to sometimes use laughter to show the other person that they have listened.

87. **Linn:** your music my pictures

88. **Anna:** yes (hah)

89. **Linn:** I like (.) to just have a camera and (.) take photographs about (.) this little things in life like (1) this piece of apple (1) pie that's just laying there on the (3) board or whatever
90. **Anna:** yes
91. **Linn:** it's can be something beautiful
92. (1)
93. **Anna:** yes

Anna's major concern seems to be to keep the conversation going and she doesn't like pauses very much which is why she uses a lot of filling words, repetitions and even laughter in order to fill in possible glitches in conversation, but she doesn't use corrections much which seems to prove that she is less concerned with pronunciation and grammatical correctness. It is also interesting to note that when she reads the instructions from a paper she does not use pauses at all. Linn uses a larger amount of pauses but seems to express herself with more confidence since she does not use repetitions to the same extent. She also seems to be more aware of the mistakes she makes than Anna to the point where she even corrects Anna's grammar.

66. **Linn:** and hang out take long walks now it's when it's spring
67. **Anna:** and bath on [the sun]
68. **Linn:** [bathe]
69. **Anna:** yes

On a couple occasions when she doesn't find the correct expression in English she just supplies the Swedish word and continues to talk without explaining the word in English, quite contrary to the instructions for the test.

45. **Anna:** yes (1) but you don't go to church every Sunday [and so]
46. **Linn:** [no, I] just go and it's konfirmationshelg

On most occasions Linn supplies a word that is similar to the one she is looking for even if the word does not exist in English.

12. **Linn:** you have the mental capte (.) cap[tility to]

and

32. **Linn:** so (1) if this could be diskusted a long time

On some occasions both girls use their hands to emphasize what they are saying or to express frustration over a word or expression they can not find, but on no occasion can I see them use their hands to express something they can not express in words. They do not have a lot of eye contact throughout the test and Anna keeps taking on and off a ring and massaging her foot while Linn keeps looking persistently into the desk. These behaviors suggest that they are not completely at ease in the testing situation.

3.2 Group 2 Lisa, Moa and Emelie

Group two also consists of three girls who are close friends and socialize both in school and outside of school. They are also very supportive and help each other out and especially Moa but also Lisa uses this by leaving her sentences for the others to finish.

318. **Moa:** [You just sit] there with a

319. (5)

320. **Lisa:** Coffee

321. (2)

322. **Moa:** Yeah

They are very fond of talking at the same time which made this conversation the most difficult to transcribe. Their utterances sort of weave into each other so that they are telling the story together.

318. **Moa:** [You just sit] there with a

319. (5)

320. **Lisa:** Coffee

321. (2)

322. **Moa:** Yeah

323. **Lisa:** Or with your friends

324. **Moa:** With your friends and just
325. (3)
326. **Lisa:** [chill]
327. **Emelie:** [Strawberries]
328. **Moa:** Yes strawberries and (1) chill in the sun
329. **Lisa:** Yeah [that's nice really nice]

This group is the only group that doesn't have a chairman. All three girls take equal responsibility to ask each other questions and keep the conversation going. Emelie uses the Swedish word *liksom* to fill her pauses on two occasions. The conversation flows steadily with a very small amount of filled pauses, repetitions or corrections, but with a large number of unfilled pauses in between turns. On five occasions do they laugh together and on a couple of occasions, especially in the beginning, they fill their own pauses with embarrassed laughter. The girls maintain constant eye contact throughout the conversation and they hardly use their hands at all.

3.3 Group 3 Anton, Jesper, Lukas and Kristian

In this group with four boys, three of them are friends who socialize in school as well as outside of school. Jesper doesn't quite belong in the group but since he doesn't really socialize with other people in the class either this was the group he ended up in. He is very quiet throughout the discussion and it is hard to tell whether this is because he doesn't feel comfortable in the group or whether he doesn't feel comfortable speaking English at all. Jesper has been absent for a large part of the lessons during the school year and has therefore received less teacher lead practice in speaking English which could add to his reluctance to speak. You can also very clearly see from his body language that he is very ill at ease in the situation. It is also obvious that while the others are very supportive of each other Jesper does not participate but stays quiet. While the others use eye contact a lot Jesper looks everywhere but at his fellow group members.

350. **Anton:** you can't
351. **Lukas:** can't stop it
352. **Anton:** yeah (3) it's goes too fast almost

353. **Kristian:** yeah

354. **Anton:** yeah

355. **Lukas:** yeah

In this group Lukas shares the role as chairman with Anton. Lukas uses the Swedish word “*eller*” as a filler on three occasions and on two occasions a nonsense word. Of all the students in this group I find Anton the most interesting. He is obviously very aware of the grammatical correctness when he speaks since he uses corrections more than any of the other students.

259. **Anton:** You cou should pick one of these subjects that fit in your

Sometimes he uses a repetition together with a correction.

51. **Anton:** Yeah fly fishing in the summers when the there it’s nice lakes it’s

When he gets really into what he is speaking about, he uses onomatopoeic words to illustrate what he is saying:

317. **Anton:** [Yeah but bicycle] kick is really fun you throw up the ball and you (hwoaaw tchi) hit [the ball]

318. **Lukas:** [Don’t you just] flip around

319. **Anton:** Yeah you flip around like (.) (wrom) and then you hit the ball [with the feet]

And he is the most supportive student in the group when others are speaking. Actually he is the most supportive of all the students in the study.

200. **Anton:** not much you can do in the [winter]

201. **Lukas:** [no] not this winter anyway

202. **Anton:** yeah

203. **Lukas:** it’s too cold

204. **Anton:** yeah

205. **Lukas:** to be outside
206. **Kristian:** yeah twenty
207. (2)
208. **Anton:** yeah
209. **Kristian:** degrees
210. **Anton:** yeah
211. **Kristian:** cold
212. (2)
213. **Anton:** yeah

Jesper only talks on three occasions in this excerpt and only when he is asked a direct question. He is very uncomfortable and keeps pulling his shirt and moving back and forth on his chair. On a direct question about where he likes to be he tries to answer with a full sentence but his lack of practice makes it difficult for him to stick with English, especially when things get difficult, despite attempts to help him from the others.

152. **Jesper:** on the winters in my room the computer (1) on the summers (2) er (4) to friends asså
153. **Kristian:** yeah
154. **Jesper:** I mean
155. **Kristian:** to be home
156. **Jesper:** yeah
157. **Anton:** smoments
158. **Jesper:** being with friends
159. **Kristian:** yeah
160. **Jesper:** in the (1) ja (2)
161. **Kristian:** like where? (2)
162. **Anton:** cities
163. **Jesper:** Hornsjön [skitmycket]

The boys in this group laugh together on seven occasions, always in between turns. In the beginning of the conversation neither of the boys used their hands but when they get more engaged in the conversation Lukas and especially Anton start to use their hands to emphasize what they are saying.

3.4 Group 4 Daniel, Linus, Anja and Arina

This group really consists of two pairs of friends put together. The two pairs do not normally socialize between them. Arina's mother tongue is Russian and she is the only student in my study who is not a borne Swede. The two boys, Daniel in particular, are acting extremely silly during the conversation and there are signs that the girls, especially Arina get annoyed with them. When I talked to the boys after the test they blamed the camera for their behavior, but chose not to redo the test without it. The conversation runs smoothly but their embarrassment is evident in the fact that this group uses laughter to fill pauses to a much greater extent than the other groups. The laughter is of course also brought on by the boys' silliness. Daniel takes on the role as chairman and starts to speak in an affected voice but hands over to Linus when he doesn't know what to say. Linus is usually the first to laugh at Daniel's silliness in addition to being silly himself and on a number of occasions he and Daniel are actually the only ones laughing and the girls choose to stay silent.

21. **Daniel:** subject is also gym class because (1) yeah I'm a great athlete er like to
22. **Daniel and Linus:** (hah)
23. **Daniel:** run a lot and I feel free at (1) gym class so (1) that's why
24. (1)
25. **Linus:** yeah

Linus also pretends to misunderstand a question from Arina in order to be funny.

217. **Arina:** do you spend your money on your girlfriend?
218. (3)
219. **Linus:** like (1) buying a girlfriend? (hah)

On one occasion he points at his wristwatch when Anja takes her time to answer a question and looks at Daniel and laughs and on another occasion he answers Daniel's request for a

high five. On a number of occasions they finish a long pause with laughter. On 16 occasions they all laugh together and on 16 occasions one of the boys laughs alone or together with the other boy. Arina laughs alone on four occasions but Anja only laughs together with the others. Throughout the conversation there is a lot of eye contact but it seems like the boys are getting an unfair share of attention from the girls. Neither of the students in this group uses their hands.

3.5 Group 5 Ted, Ludde, Martin and Sonja

This group is put together with three close friends and then Sonja who missed her group and was then put in this group for the test which she was not happy about. She claims that it affected her performance. Ted takes on the role as chairman and the boys share the talking space but Sonja says quiet. She doesn't even acknowledge what the boys say. When she is asked a question she answers it pretty quickly but makes no effort to continue the subject. On one occasion when Ludde tries to say something but can't find the proper expression in English he first supplies the Swedish expression but realizing it doesn't make much sense in English he gives it up completely.

172. **Ludde:** To have the (1) how should you say

173. (2)

174. **Martin:** (hah)

175. **Ludde:** ork () (1) er äh skit samma

In this group they laugh together on eleven occasions. Martin laughs alone on at least eight occasions and Ted on six. On one occasion Sonja chooses another expression with a similar meaning when she can not find the correct expression and Ted helps her with a better expression.

59. **Sonja:** Er (3) er (3) it's about (2) er the writer (2) things I like (2) the true stuff

60. **Ted:** Yeah

61. (2)

62. **Martin:** Ok

63. **Ted:** Rea:lity stuff

Two students in this group, Sonja and Ludde, use their hands for emphasis. All the students have eye contact but there are signs of nervousness because Sonja looks away when she laughs and Ted is extremely fidgety.

3.6 Analysis of the questionnaire

In the survey given to the students after doing the test, almost all the students say that they feel comfortable when speaking English but a lot of them claimed that they find it easier when you talk with friends and in a smaller group. Responding to the question if they speak English outside of school, most students say they don't but some speak English when they play games over the Internet; it is, however, unclear here whether they confuse chatting with speaking. This shows clearly how important speaking exercises in the classroom are in preparation for the tests. Responding to the question if they have been in a situation where they felt that they didn't know enough English the boys say no for the most part but the girls talk about explaining things and even not knowing enough about the subject. Responding to the question what the students find the most difficult when speaking English, the girls seem more concerned with the grammar and the boys with pronunciation. When the students are asked what they do if they can't find a word or expression in English the girls say that they try to explain it in another way which is the exact instructions they have been given for the test and the boys list more unproductive strategies like saying the Swedish word. About half of the students say that they were prepared for the test and those who were not prepared say that they had forgotten about it or that they had not practiced. They were also asked to say how they think they performed on the test but almost all the students say that they do not know because they have not been given the grade yet.

Responding to the question what they could have done differently in order to do better, more boys than girls state that they could not have done anything differently or perhaps talked some more. Two girls were concerned with their groups and claim that they would have done better in another group. Most students claim that they forgot completely about the camera apart from maybe a short time in the beginning and most students claim they know nothing about the criteria for grading the oral part of the national test.

4. Discussion

The aim of this essay is to look at a group of ninth grade students during the oral part of the national test and to see what strategies they use in order to achieve working communication. In this study, one of the groups stand out as the most talkative namely group 2 with Lisa, Moa

and Emelie. All three of them are very active both in terms of longer responses and short ones. Lisa is the student in the whole study with the largest number of lines in total. This group also has the largest number of pauses in between turns which could be caused by the fact that they take care of the chairmanship together. Out of the eight most talkative students with more than eighty long utterances, five of them are girls, but if you count the eleven students who have more than sixty long answers, six of them are boys. The person with the largest number of short answers is surprisingly a boy, Anton. This is surprising since previous research suggest that this type of collaborative utterances is typical of female speech. Out of the nine students who have more than twenty short answers five are boys. It is also evident that both boys and girls do better in one sex groups, both long and short answers suffer in the mixed groups for both sexes. Another thing that seems important is that you do the test with people you feel comfortable with since both Jesper and Sonja do really poorly in the groups where they were put for different reasons. One group which is really interesting to study is group number four. It is very evident from the structure of the conversation that the group is composed of two parts: the boys and the girls. Daniel is the person with the largest number of long utterances and he is strongly supported by Linus who has the largest number of short answers. The girls seem to get a smaller talking space and they have a very small number of short answers, suggesting that they don't feel completely at ease in the boys' company.

One factor that can influence a student's performance on the national test is the composition of the groups. In the instructions from Skolverket we are told to put together students who are approximately at the same grade level, which I have done, but other factors that need to be taken into consideration are how well the students know each other and therefore how comfortable they feel when speaking English together. The instructions tell us not to group students who do not work well together but I would go further than that and say that they should be friends and used to talking to each other. The importance of this is extremely evident in the answers to the questionnaire where most students claim that they feel less comfortable when speaking English to strangers. One girl was very upset because she got sick on the date when her friends had their test so she had to get tested in another group and she felt that it affected her performance in a negative way. Students who are friends also find it easier to understand each other since they are used to listening to each other and they also share a common bank of experiences. Two of the groups were mixed groups and this could also affect the students' performance, especially the girls, negatively, often without the students being aware of it. Strangely enough only one girl mentions in the questionnaire that she feels more comfortable when talking to other girls. Is this because girls are so used to

fighting over talking space with boys that they don't even notice this anymore or are the girls so safe in their own performance that they don't care what the boys do? On one occasion the boys try to make fun of a girl who takes her time to formulate what she wants to say. It is unclear whether she notices this or not.

It is evident that the most widely used strategy in this group is pauses, either filled or unfilled, in order to gain time for preparation. This makes perfect sense since because of the grouping the students are on a similar level in their English skills and according to the work of Cenoz (1998) the more proficient you get in English the more pauses you tend to use. Unfilled pauses are more common than filled pauses among all the students in the group which is probably due to the fact that I didn't separate the juncture pauses from the non-juncture pauses because I found it difficult to tell them apart and felt that it would be guesswork on my part. Some of the non-filled pauses in this study are probably juncture pauses and not part of the strategies, but the vast majority in my view is strategies. The student in this study with the largest amount of unfilled pauses is Linn closely followed by Anna and Daniel. Daniel also has the largest amount of filled pauses followed by Anna, Linn and Anton. It makes sense that these students have the largest amount of pauses since they also have a very large amount of lines in the study, what is strange though is that Lisa, Moa and Emelie all have a larger amount of total lines but have less pauses.

I also studied the number of repetitions i.e. when students repeat a word or part of a word in order to gain time to produce what they intend to say. The students in this study with the largest amount of repetitions are Anna and Ted. This could indicate that they are the ones who are most concerned with fluency and in Anna's case it is combined with a large number of filled pauses as well but not for Ted. The next thing I studied was the number of self corrections. I did not distinguish between lexical corrections and grammatical corrections but counted all corrections together. The students in this group with the largest number of corrections are Linn and Anton which could indicate that they are the ones most concerned with grammatical correctness and in Linn's case it also coincides with a large number of pauses, suggesting that she is less concerned with fluency in the conversation. Other strategies that I have noticed are for example the sound imitating utterances from Anton and Lukas and the constant joking from Daniel and Linus.

It is also evident in this study that some students find it difficult to stick to English, especially when they get stressed by not finding the words that they need fast enough. In some cases this only results in the occasional Swedish word for example "*liksom*" and in other cases it results in a whole Swedish expression left unexplained or the

abandonment of the whole thing. It is also evident that the composition of the groups is extremely important. Two students seem to suffer from badly composed groups in particular and that is Sonja and Jesper, whether it is worse for them to be with people they are not comfortable with or to be with people who have superior English skills is not clear, but it is clear that they do not get to do their best. The gender mixed groups are also problematic in this study. Daniel and Linus are constantly cracking jokes and behaving in a manner that is very out of character for them. They blame the camera but I wonder if it is not the presence of the girls which forces them into this behavior. The girls in their turn are quite silent and not very supportive of the boys or even each other. In the conversation between Linn and Anna and Anton, Kristian, Jesper and Lukas they have very few pauses in between turns which indicates that their conversation is running quite smoothly whereas in the other group of close friends Lisa, Moa and Emelie they have the largest amount of pauses in between turns.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that speaking practice in the classroom is vital for the students' achievement on the national test. It also shows that a teacher can affect a student's performance negatively by grouping students who are less familiar with one another. In addition the study reinforces the need for documentation through filming or taping, something that is strongly recommended by Skolverket too, or at least to be two teachers when grading, but that is impossible in most schools today. What I saw when I studied the tapes afterwards was very different from what I saw when the students were doing the test. It also seems very important from an early stage to work with those students who in the classroom are using the less productive strategies so that they can change them into more productive ones by making them aware of the consequences. Speaking practice in the classroom seems to be vital since most students claim that they speak very little English outside the classroom. Girls in this study say that they are concerned with grammar when speaking but nothing of this showed in the conversations. On the contrary, since one girl and one boy have the largest amount of corrections in the study. Boys seem to be more confident in saying that they could have done nothing differently whereas girls list speaking practice but also blame other people in their group for their shortcomings. It also seems important to make the students aware of pauses as a strategy so that they do not feel stressed about them since fluency is listed in the instructions as something to aim for and if the students think that pauses are only a sign of lack of fluency it might create unnecessary stress for them.

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7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix i

Results of the questionnaires presented to the students after doing the oral part of the national tests. 8 girls, 7 boys, 5 unidentified. Total of 20 answers

1. Do you feel comfortable when speaking English?

Girls: Rather/ Most of the time yes, it depends on the subject you are discussing and who you are talking with./ Yes, I think it is quite ok and it is good to know when you go abroad/ Rather, in the beginning it is a little bit difficult but when you have spoken for a while it feels good./ Most of the time when I speak to people I know./ Not particularly but it totally depends on who you are speaking to if it is my friends I feel comfortable but not with people I don't know or in front of the class./It depends on who you are sitting together with, some people I can speak English in front of without any problems but with some it doesn't feel as comfortable./ I feel more comfortable when I speak English outside the classroom because there is less pressure then.

Boys: Most of the time but it takes a while before you get started./ Yes./Yes I do, We've been doing it since second grade so yes./ Yes, because it is easy and fun./ Yes I feel comfortable./Yes rather, with my friends anyway./ Yes partly, if you are sitting and talking to good friends your stress level and nervousness go down and it becomes easier to speak.

Unidentified: Yes, I feel no worry/stress./ Yes, I do. / Well, not uncomfortable but I prefer not to./ Yes, with people I know, but not with people from school that I don't know./ Yes.

2. Is there any situation where you feel more comfortable? Less comfortable?

Girls: It works better when we work in smaller groups than in a big group./ It feels more comfortable with girls but I don't really know why./ Like I said before when I can speak with my friends./ I can speak in front of family and friends, to speak with strangers makes me nervous./With my friends it feels good because we are at the same level and you are not as afraid of saying something wrong./ I feel more comfortable doing it together with my friends or abroad./More comfortable with people I know who know English about as well as I do,

uncomfortable in front of a large group./ If I talk to people I know and socialize with it is more comfortable than with those I don't usually socialize with.

Boys: Yes as I said with people I find it easy to talk to, those you talk to without having to. /With my friends./ To speak English in a small group is comfortable but in the whole class it's a little bit nervous/ By the computer when you talk in a microphone/ To talk about myself or to talk about something that I know a lot about./ No./ If you talk with your friends about things you like it's easier.

Unidentified: No./ With my friends./ When you don't have to speak, then it becomes more of a game and less serious./ No, I don't./ I'm more comfortable with people I know.

3. Do you speak English outside school? Who do you talk to then?

Girls: No, almost not at all./ Spontaneously almost all of my friends and I English./ Sometimes I talk a little with my mom and my boyfriend./ Sometimes at home, my dad's girlfriend moved here from Australia 1 ½ years ago, but we speak mostly Swedish so that she will learn./ Yes, pretty much with my friends at the computer./ No, not at all./ No, not often. I need to speak English./ No, But I can speak English a little now and then but then it is with anyone.

Boys: No, or I guess I speak it a little now and then because it just happens./ Not much, a little with friends but then maybe you just say a few words./ Yes, sometimes in games on Skype./ Yes! Mostly on the computer otherwise with my sister./ Not much. Mostly in games when I write in English./ I usually speak unserious English with my friends but then it also happens often when you meet English people on the Internet. / Not so much only for fun with people I find it easy to talk to, those you talk to without having to.

Unidentified: Yes, with people from the USA and from Great Britain./ When I play over the Internet/ I can't say that I do but sometimes I start to speak English./ Sometimes with an English friend./ No.

4. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt that your ability to speak English was not enough? Tell me about it.

Girls: Yes, when we had the oral part of the national test, I felt that I didn't do my best./ Yes, on the oral part of the national test. It was because I didn't have an opinion about the subject so there was not much to say. It feels bad that I didn't have more to say./ Yes, when I'm supposed to explain something in a game to the other players./ Yes, when there are words that

you don't know what they are in English/ Yes, in school when you are supposed to explain and you don't really know the words for what you are talking about./ During lessons during a national test when you are being graded./ Yes, when I was in a hurry and I was supposed to tell a person who asked me in English if I wanted to try a perfume.

Boys: No, I don't think so but often in stressful situations when you really have to speak it can often be difficult to find the right words./No, not really./ No./ Once when I was ten years old when I was supposed to give directions to a stranger./ Five years ago when some Americans were visiting us./ No./ Yes, when I have spoken to adults about their occupation and they use difficult words.

Unidentified: Yes, when you can't think of certain words that you want to use./ No, I don't because I know the most important things./ Yes, absolutely. Isn't it like that for everyone?/ No, I don't/ Yes, when you have to explain something and you can't because you don't find the words.

5. What do you think is the most difficult part when you speak English?

Girls: Sometimes I forget what certain things are called./ To know if others understand you correctly or if there are misunderstandings/ That you forget what certain words are./ To have fluency in the beginning and to have a nuanced language, some words that you don't remember or know what they are called./ I always forget the grammar so sometimes I get sentences that are completely different./ That people are watching and focusing on me./ It is probably to keep track of the grammar but I don't find English difficult otherwise.

Boys: To not start to think about other things when you speak./ To pronounce all the words correctly./ some pronunciations, maybe 1/10 of all the words./ To pronounce the words correctly, some words with strange spelling./ The beginning is the hardest, but then when you have been talking for a while you become more comfortable with it./ Good pronunciation

Unidentified: To find the words./ I don't know really, maybe places where you don't know that it's going to happen./ To be fluent and to make it sound natural./ To know when there is supposed to be an "s" after the verb. / Pronunciation.

6. Do you sometimes find it difficult to express what you want to say in English and what do you do then?

Girls: Yes, sometimes but then I try to explain or find another word to describe it./ No, it doesn't usually happen. If it happens I can explain around the word I don't know./ I show with pictures or describe with different words./ Yes, sometimes. I try to express it in another

way with different words./I try to describe as much as possible. / If I don't find exactly the word I'm looking for I look for synonyms or ask for help./ Then I think and then I find the word I'm looking for.

Boys: I say: I don't know how to say this in English./ Sometimes you don't know what a certain thing is called and then you have to explain or talk a little Swenglish, but only sometimes./ It doesn't happen very often but then I try to explain with different words./ Yes, sometimes but then I use my body to describe./ Sometimes but then you explain in some other way.

Unidentified: Yes sometimes, then I try to speak around it./ Sometimes, I try to explain./ I say it in Swedish or try in another way./ sometimes, then I ask my father who is ? in English./ Yes, I try to show with my hands etc.

7. Did you feel that you were well prepared for the oral part of the national test? Why?

Why not?

Girls: No, not really. I always get so nervous before national tests./ Yes, to speak English is not a problem, only to have something to talk about./ Not very, it was afternoon and I was hungry and did not feel like talking at all./ No, I didn't know that I was going to end up in a group with "strangers"./ Yes, we talked or tried to talk English the lesson before in order to gain fluency./ Yes, it felt like I did well and I am happy with my oral part. / Yes, there wasn't really anything to practice on except to speak English a lot and I had. /Yes, rather.

Boys: No, I don't think I knew about it, or I had forgotten./ Yes, but not completely. I had forgotten about it a little./ Yepp, I did. I have spoken English many times before, that's why./ No, not much. I should have been participating more during lessons when we have spoken English, but the national test still felt pretty good./Yes it is not hard to speak English./ Yes, because we practiced a lot before the test. / No, I haven't practiced at all.

Unidentified: Yes, we had spoken English an hour before the test./ Yes, I did because we have had the opportunity to practice./ I could have spoken more during lessons to get a better result./ Yes, I had had a lot of instructions./ Yes, it wasn't very difficult.

8. Was the result as you expected?

Girls: I don't know the result yet./ No, not quite./ I have not been told./ Yes, I passed./ I thought I was going to speak more than I did. I just agreed with what the others said./ I don't know yet, but I don't think so./ I don't know really. I had wished that I could have done better.

Boys: I don't know, maybe just a bit of bad fluency/ Don't have it yet./ Haven't got it yet./ Haven't seen the result yet./ Well, better actually. Got a VG as I hoped./ Don't remember.

Unidentified: I don't know yet. I hope so./ I don't know, haven't seen it./ I don't know the result yet, but it felt so-so./ I expected to do better./ I don't know what the result was.

9. What could you have done differently to get a different result?

Girls: I could have tried to explain my words better and talked more English before./ Found more things to talk about, had more opinions./ Had another group. Didn't feel quite comfortable plus the others always talk more than I do./ I couldn't have done so much more, I have just moved./ I probably couldn't have done more./ No idea because I don't know what I got./ I was hurt by a person in my group, should have focused more instead./ I don't know, talked more?/

Boys: Practice more and such./ Nothing, I wanted a VG./ Talked more and with more difficult words./ I couldn't have done anything./ Prepared more by speaking more English at home.

Unidentified: It probably couldn't have changed./ Talked more during lessons./ Talked more, been more active./ Talk more.

10. How did you react to the camera?

Girls: In the beginning it felt weird, but then I forgot about it./ I mostly laughed, got nervous./ A bit irritating, but you forgot it after a while./ Wasn't filmed.

Boys: I didn't react to it./ Nothing. I totally ignored it but maybe not in the beginning./ In the beginning it was a bit weird but then you didn't think about it./ I didn't care at all./ Nothing, it was fun with something new./ Afraid! No, but I didn't have the camera so to speak.

Unidentified: I had no camera./ A bit stressful. It felt like someone was staring at you./ I forgot that it was there./ Not at all/

11. What do you know about the criteria for grading the oral part of the national test in English?

Girls: Nothing I think or that you should have the right grammar./ That the teacher checks fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar./ I have no idea./ That you should have fluency and speak with some confidence./ Don't remember./ Not much./ I don't know about them.

Boys: I have forgotten./ When it was you knew most of them, you sort of knew them all./ Not much at all. I hope that the accent, the grammar and choice of words were important anyway./

I don't know exactly what they look like. Don't feel much./ Not much at all./ You should be clear, have fluency and be grammatically correct.

Unidentified: Nothing./ Not much./ Nothing, kind of./ Not a clue./ Not much, haven't checked.