Assessing oral proficiency in the EFL classroom

A qualitative study of teachers’ understanding, experience, and assessment of oral production, and interaction in Swedish upper secondary schools

Author: Eva Smit
Supervisor: Charlotte Hommerberg
Examiner: Marie Källkvist
Term: HT19
Subject: English Educational Linguistics
Level: Bachelor’s Thesis
Course code: 2ENÄ2E
Abstract
Oral proficiency plays a crucial part in mastering the English language. It is, because of that, heavily debated among professors and teachers. Among teachers, uncertainty prevails regarding how oral proficiency should be taught and assessed. This qualitative study aims to raise awareness of how teachers define, understand, and experience oral proficiency in the upper secondary EFL classroom. Furthermore, this study seeks to analyze teachers’ conflicting perceptions regarding the assessment process along with what problems they encounter and how they solve these problems. Four EFL teachers from three schools in the south of Sweden lay the foundation for the study. Semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data collection in order to gain insights from the teachers’ reflections. The data of the interviews were analyzed with the help of the grounded theory approach. Adopting this theory, the results of the study show that the four EFL teachers had general difficulties understanding the terms assessment and oral proficiency. While one teacher viewed oral proficiency as a two-fold challenge, another stated that in order to get a good grade, good discussion abilities are vital. When assessing students’ oral proficiency, the teachers focused on different features such as pronunciation, fluency, variation, interaction, content, and vocabulary.

Key words
Assessment of oral proficiency, communicative competence, EFL teaching, foreign language speaking anxiety, oral interaction, oral production, oral proficiency

Acknowledgments
A thank you is dedicated to the informants who chose to engage in the study, this study would not have been possible to conduct without their experiences. Lastly, a special thank you is dedicated to Charlotte Hommerberg for
supervising me throughout this study. Her time, patience, guidance, and advice have been extremely valuable.
# Table of contents

1. **Introduction**  
   1.1 Aim and research questions  

2. **Background**  
   2.1 Communicative Competence  

3. **Literature Review**  
   3.1 Definition of ‘Oral Proficiency’  
   3.2 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety  
   3.3 Assessment of oral proficiency  

4. **Method and participants**  
   4.1 Interviews  
      4.1.1 The interview situation  
   4.2 Grounded theory approach  
   4.3 Participants  
      4.3.1 Oscar  
      4.3.2 Anna  
      4.3.3 Adam  
      4.3.4 Daniel  
   4.4 Ethical considerations  
   4.5 Limitations of the study  

5. **Results**  
   5.1 Teachers’ understanding of oral proficiency  
      5.1.1 Teachers’ perceptions of oral production  
      5.1.2 Teachers’ perceptions of oral interaction  
   5.2 Teachers’ experience of oral proficiency  
      5.2.1 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety  
   5.3 Assessment of oral proficiency  
      5.3.1 Teachers’ grading criteria for assessing oral proficiency  
      5.3.2 Assessment situations and materials  
      5.3.3 Problems and solutions when assessing oral proficiency  
   5.4 Summary  

6. **Discussion**  
   6.1 Content discussion  
      6.1.1 Teachers’ definitions and understanding of oral proficiency  
      6.1.2 Teachers’ experiences of oral proficiency  
      6.1.3 Teachers’ assessment of oral proficiency  
   6.2 Suggestions for further research  

7. **Conclusion and implications for the teacher practice**  

Appendix 1 – Interview protocol  
Appendix 2 – Teachers’ quotes  
Appendix 3 – Letter of information
1 Introduction
Living in today’s world requires a high level of English language proficiency due to the widespread use of English in Europe and beyond. The English language dominates over other languages and has come to function as a lingua franca. It is often referred to as a “vehicular language”, which makes communication possible between non-native speakers of the English language (Björkman 2013: 28). According to the National Agency for Education (2011), “knowledge of English increases the individual's opportunities to participate in different social and cultural contexts, as well as in global studies and working life.” Mastering the English language also contributes to “new perspectives on the surrounding world, enhanced opportunities to create contacts, and greater understanding of different ways of living” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2011).

Oral proficiency plays a crucial part in mastering the English language. However, many teachers find it challenging to assess oral proficiency on a fair level since the knowledge requirements are rather vague and indistinct (Apelgren & Oscarson 2011: 3). An example of such vagueness could be “in oral and written presentations in various genres, the student can express themselves relatively varied, relatively clear, and relatively coherent” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2011). As a result, teachers make their own interpretations of the criteria in the curriculum, which can create problems in assessing the students on a fair level. Moreover, teachers tend to take factors such as motivation and attendance into account when grading although these factors are not mentioned in the syllabus (Apelgren & Oscarson 2011: 3).

According to Sundqvist, Wikström, Sandlund, and Nyroos (2018: 219), there is to date limited research on L2 oral proficiency and L2 oral testing. Apelgren and Oscarson’s (2011) study did not go in-depth into the teachers’
understanding of oral proficiency, the assessment procedure, their reasons for assessing the way they do, and what types of activities they use to enhance students’ communicative competences. Hence, this study will further contribute to the knowledge of teachers’ understanding of oral proficiency and assessment within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. For teachers, acquiring knowledge of assessment is essential since it aids them in understanding the process of assessing. The study can benefit active teachers as well as teacher students by offering insights into how experienced colleagues deal with issues associated with oral proficiency and assessment. A previous thesis, which conducted a similar study at various compulsory schools (Olsson 2018), has inspired this investigation; however, this study extends the research to upper secondary school. In other words, English teachers at upper secondary schools are the main beneficiaries of this study.

1.1 Aim and research questions
The study aims to analyze and investigate how teachers define, understand, and experience oral proficiency in the upper secondary EFL classroom. Furthermore, the study seeks to analyze teachers’ perceptions when it comes to the assessment of students’ oral proficiency along with what problems they encounter and how they solve these problems. Four EFL teachers from three different schools were interviewed for this study.

The following research questions will be further explored:

1. How do the EFL teachers define and understand oral proficiency?
2. In what ways do the EFL teachers experience oral proficiency?
3. How do the EFL teachers assess students’ oral proficiency?
4. Based on the teachers’ assessment of students’ oral proficiency, what problems do they encounter and how do they solve these problems?
2 Background

This section describes the origin of the concept *communicative competence* and will provide a description of what central components are the most essential ones regarding the term. The section functions as an introduction to the next following section: *Literature review*.

2.1 Communicative Competence

The theoretical origin of communicative competence has its foundation in one well-known linguist’s findings, Dell Hymes (Cazden 2011: 364). Hymes was one of the first to discuss communicative competence, which is defined as:

> Communicative competence includes not only knowledge of language forms but also knowledge of form-function relationships learned from the embeddedness of all language use in social life.

(Hymes 1972, in Cazden 2011: 366-367)

With this intention, Hymes’ theory of communicative competence has been established as a prominent concept within language teaching.

Communicative competence, according to Lundahl (2019) and Yule (2017), involves three essential components; grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. These components are essential to incorporate in teaching and are defined as “the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately and flexibly” (Yule 2017: 216). All elements are relevant to the core content of the syllabus for English 6 and essential for new teachers to understand.
The first component is grammatical competence which involves pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, and morphology. In other words, it describes how to use words and structures accurately (Lundahl 2019: 98). The aspect of grammatical competence is also referred to as the “processing of language and structure in their own and others’ oral and written communications, and also in formal contexts” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2011).

Sociolinguistic competence as the second component is further divided into sociocultural and discourse competence. While sociocultural competence deals with adapting the language to social situations, discourse competence concerns the ability to put all parts of the language together into coherent pieces. The syllabus claims that teaching should incorporate “oral and written production and interaction in different situations and for different purposes where students argue, report, apply, reason, summarise, comment on, assess and give reasons for their views” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2011). Sociolinguistic competence has also been described as pragmatic competence since it connects to Hymes’ emphasis concerning appropriate language use (Lundahl 2019: 98).

Lastly, strategic competence signifies the ability to arrange a message effectively and, with the use of strategies, to compensate when experiencing challenges. With communication strategies, Yule (2017: 216) implies mastering the gap between communicative intent and the ability of the individual to formulate that intent. In the syllabus, the aspect of strategic competence is referred to as “strategies for contributing to and actively participating in argumentation, debates and discussions related to societal and working life” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2011). In other words, strategic competence concerns using reformulations and body language to support and clarify our statements.
3 Literature Review

The sections below provide definitions and descriptions of concepts that are of relevance when investigating the present topic. The three theoretical concepts used in the study are definition of ‘oral proficiency,’ foreign language speaking anxiety, and assessment of oral proficiency. These concepts are relevant since they provide insights into what oral proficiency is as well as why assessment of oral proficiency can be considered challenging.

3.1 Definition of ‘Oral Proficiency’

According to Sundh (2003: 57) oral proficiency describes a students’ “competence”, “capability” and “capacity”. He proceeds to explain the difference between these terms yet explains how they can be used interchangeably due to their similarity in meaning. Sundh (2003) uses this point to exemplify how proficiency in itself is a broad term that becomes more difficult when trying to determine an actual definition (Sundh 2003: 58). Even Farhady (1982: 44) mentions that oral proficiency has been one of the most difficult concepts to define in the field of language education. However, Sundh (2003: 58) concludes by mentioning that oral proficiency defines a student’s ability to use their knowledge in specific contexts. A more specific definition of oral proficiency is presented by August (2008).

“Oral language proficiency: phonology (ability to recognize and produce sounds and sound sequences that make up language), vocabulary, morphology, grammar, and discourse features” (August 2008).

3.2 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

The phenomenon of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety is relevant for oral proficiency in EFL since this circumstance can affect learners’ oral production significantly (Yalçın & İnceçay 2014: 2620). Anxious learners identify oral production in the target language as frightening which, in turn, affects their
oral proficiency abilities negatively. Although most language teachers are aware of the existence of this phenomenon, it tends to be problematic to classify whether a student is experiencing speaking anxiety or is lacking motivation to speak (Yalçın & İnceçay 2014: 2621).

Foreign language speaking anxiety has its origins in research on second language acquisition and language teaching. According to Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986: 128), the concept of foreign language anxiety can be described as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.” MacIntyre and Gardner (1994: 284), interpreted it as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning.” In other words, foreign language speaking anxiety concerns a situational anxiety reaction related to communication in a non-native tongue. This concept can impact all individuals, even the ones who are generally not anxious. It is, therefore, extremely crucial for a teacher to be able to distinguish these symptoms of anxiety to help the students achieve their goals.

Horwitz et al. (1986) declare that foreign language speaking anxiety is divided into three dimensions: (1) communication apprehension; (2) test anxiety; and (3) a fear of negative evaluation. First, communication apprehension is the type of anxiety people experience daily when communicating with other people. The second aspect, test anxiety, refers to the fear of performing badly. This type of anxiety is specifically common during examination situations and can be experienced by all individuals. The third and final aspect, the fear of negative evaluations, is often associated with an individual’s perceptions. It refers to how others judge their foreign language ability from a negative point of view (Horwitz et al. 1986; Aichhorn & Puck 2017: 751).
Moreover, Horwitz et al. (1986) established that non-native students tend to “freeze” as well as suffer from mental blockage when being addressed to answer a question. Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1994), on the other hand, found that students suffering from language anxiety “experience considerable loss of self-confidence and self-esteem.” Additionally, Bergström (2017) conducted a study on the topic of foreign language speaking anxiety and acknowledged the fact that this specific topic is not a widespread phenomenon.

3.3 Assessment of oral proficiency

According to Apelgren and Oscarson (2011), assessment of oral proficiency is challenging since the assessment methods need to be suitable and applicable to the modern curriculum. Their study of teachers’ concepts of student assessment concludes that one of the most common assessment activities was classroom observation of oral communication. However, even though these types of activities were highly valued by teachers, Apelgren and Oscarson (2011) revealed that teachers are not acquainted with the assessment methods.

Sundqvist et al. (2018) state that oral proficiency tests present challenges to standardization. The challenges are that social interaction such as conversations are difficult to control, and therefore assess. According to Sandlund and Sundqvist (2019), the interactional abilities of a student play an essential role in the assessment of oral proficiency, i.e. that those types of abilities can lay the foundation for the assessment process (Sandlund & Sundqvist 2019: 360).

Brown, Iwashita, and McNamara (2005) assert that the criteria in the curriculum are viewed differently among teachers since they tend to focus on including criteria not mentioned in the curriculum. These criteria often involve motivation, attendance, and manners instead of fluency and flow. However, Brown et al. (2005) do not focus on Swedish curricular documents. The
Swedish curricular documents lack specific guidelines for oral proficiency assessment since assessment is described as one single aspect.

Communicative skill is a broadly defined concept that involves a series of behaviors. For example, communication strategies, comprehension, being able to initiate a conversation and developing it, and the aspect of discourse – both structure and content along with organization (Brown et al. 2005: 6-7). Teachers also seem to focus on functional requirements such as description, narration and hypothesizing. However, teachers view these requirements differently considering that some teachers concentrated on specific linguistic structures while others looked more into whether the language was appropriate to context and content (Brown et al. 2005: 7).

Brown et al.’s (2005) results revealed that compulsory school teachers focused more on grammatical competence such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax. Upper secondary school teachers, on the other hand, concentrated on sociolinguistic and strategic competence, such as adapting the language to social situations. Rea-Dickens (2004) declared that teachers make use of “implicit constructs.” These constructs define the teachers’ own standards and interpretations when assessing the performance of the students (Rea-Dickens 2004: 253). However, these individual constructs can result in a gap between what teachers actually assess and what they are expected to assess.

Teachers can only assess a certain number of features. Exposure to too many features could result in teachers feeling overwhelmed. This could jeopardize how they would interpret the guidelines and thus, the accuracy of grading could be flawed according to Frisch (2015: 41).
4 Method and participants

The following section provides a description of the interviews and the participants that engaged in the study. Finally, a section on ethical considerations concerning the study will be included and explained.

4.1 Interviews

The data of this study were retrieved by conducting interviews with four EFL teachers. The overall aim of the interviews was to gain insights into how four EFL teachers understand and assess oral proficiency. Additionally, semi-structured interviews lay the foundation for this study, which indicates that the interviewer has an interview guide at hand; however, the order of the questions can vary. During the interviews, the teachers discussed their understanding of oral proficiency, how they define and experience oral proficiency, and the assessment of oral proficiency. The questions are open-ended with room for the informant to elaborate on specific issues (Denscombe 2014: 186). Using the method of interviews contributes to providing the researcher with more insights into how the EFL teachers gain knowledge of how to assess as well as their views on oral proficiency.

The act of conducting interviews offers advantages as well as disadvantages. The main advantage is that interviews contribute to the depth of information. In other words, interviews produce data that deal with that specific topic which then can be pursued in-depth. The downside, on the other hand, is that the informants may attempt to shed a favorable light on themselves rather than describing their reality in unbiased ways. Another disadvantage of interviews is that this is a rather time-consuming method of data collection since transcribing is a major task after the interviews have been conducted (Denscombe 2014: 202-203).

According to Block (2000: 760), interviews are complex social as well as
sociolinguistic events. He points out that during the course of an interview, the informants might adopt various roles in relation to them feeling positioned in specific ways due to particular questions. That is, the interviewees respond in contrasting manners depending on their level of expertise. This can further be considered a problematic aspect and disadvantage when conducting interviews.

4.1.1 The interview situation
The four interviews were all conducted in consultation with the teachers and according to their schedule. Three out of four interviews took place at the teachers’ workplace to make them feel confident when they shared personal opinions and reflections. The remaining interview was carried out over FaceTime since traveling back and forth was too time-consuming. A total of 26 questions were constructed which were divided into three different themes; background of the teacher, oral proficiency and assessment, and oral proficiency in relation to the curriculum. These themes were picked based on their relevance in relation to the aim of the study. Each interview lasted for approximately 30-40 minutes and the chosen language for the interviews was Swedish. The interviews were set to function as a social interaction where both the interviewer and the informant have an impact on the data collection. However, factors such as the informants’ level of experience and the atmosphere in which the interviews were conducted may affect the overall results. Furthermore, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. For the complete interview protocol, see Appendix 1.

4.2 Grounded theory approach
According to Coolican (2014), it can be difficult to compare the informants’ individual perceptions and opinions with one another. It is therefore necessary to use a systematic analysis procedure. Denscombe (2014) describes that this approach is about creating theories that are based on the teachers’ reasons and thoughts. In other words, grounded theory develops concepts and theories
directly from the data that are analyzed. The grounded theory approach focuses specifically on ideas or concepts that can be developed when looking at explicit situations (Denscombe 2014: 107, 285).

The process of analyzing transcribed interviews requires a close examination of the text and categorizing the data. The researcher needs to define categories and themes that occur during the interviews to analyze and decipher the correlation between the teachers’ responses. Categorizations are done with the help of codes. The goal of the analysis is to arrive at general reflections of the interviewees’ perceptions and views that are of importance for the study (Denscombe 2014: 285).

According to Babchuk (1996: 18), an advantage of grounded theory is that it is guided by the informants and therefore their reasoning and thoughts should “emerge naturally from the analysis with little effort or detailed attention to […] the researcher.” In other words, the ideas of the informants play an essential role in this approach. Although only four informants engaged in the study, the study’s generalizability can be discussed. A good generalizability can be achieved by increasing the number of participants. Furthermore, this specific approach helps to develop the precision, replicability as well as the significance of the study. That is, the theory helps the study to be more precise and to make sure that the data are true (Babchuk 1996: 18). Another advantage of the approach is its “flexibility of application” since the theory can be used in several different types of studies. However, this can also be seen as a disadvantage since it can be confusing to know how the theory can be implemented (Babchuk 1996:18). The difficulties that were encountered when applying the grounded theory to the data was to identify a correlation between the informants’ different responses and to decide under which category or theme their expressions best would fit. Since their ideas varied a great deal, further difficulties occurred in establishing what categories to use.
4.3 Participants

Four EFL teachers gave their consent to partake in the study where all teachers work at upper secondary schools in the south of Sweden. The technique of convenience sampling was applied, which involved contacting participants that were close at hand, were readily available, and easy to contact. One female teacher and three male teachers with various range of experience are involved in the study. Table 1 shows the pseudonyms of the participants, their academic degrees, years of experience, what other subjects they teach, the year they teach, group size, and the setting of the interviews.
Table 1. The participants of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Teacher certification</th>
<th>Academic degree</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Other subjects</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Group size</th>
<th>Interview setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master of Education in Swedish and English</td>
<td>40 years</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>English 5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>32 students at most</td>
<td>Teacher’s workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master of Education in English &amp; teacher degree in Swedish and English</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>English 5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>29 students at most</td>
<td>Facetime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s degree in English &amp; teacher degree in Swedish and English</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>English 5 &amp; 6</td>
<td>20 students at most</td>
<td>Teacher’s workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master of Education in English &amp; teacher degree in Swedish and English</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>English 6 &amp; 7</td>
<td>32 students at most</td>
<td>Teacher’s workplace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.1 Oscar

Oscar is a licensed teacher of Swedish and English with 40 years of experience. He teaches English 5 and 6 and Swedish in years 1-3 at an upper
secondary school in Sweden. Oscar works 80% at an upper secondary school and 20% at a university. He teaches five classes at the upper secondary school while the number of classes is unknown regarding the university. The classes vary in size with three classes consisting of 32 students. Beyond these three classes, he has a literature group of 16 students and a special course of four students who practice their Swedish.

4.3.2 Anna
Anna is a licensed teacher of Swedish and English with 21 years of experience. She teaches both English 5 and 6 as well as Swedish in years 1 and 2 at an upper secondary school in Sweden. Anna has a total of six classes divided into three English classes and three Swedish classes. The biggest class, English 6 in the social science program, consists of 29 students whereas a first-year, electricity and energy program, consists of 19 students. The remaining class, a first-year restaurant and food program consist of 17 students.

4.3.3 Adam
Adam is a licensed teacher of Swedish and English with 20 years of experience teaching English 5 and 6 and Swedish in years 1-3 at an upper secondary school in Sweden. He has a total of 80-100 students combined and focuses mainly on students from the hotel and tourism program. Adam’s classes consist of around 20 students per class.

4.3.4 Daniel
Daniel is a licensed teacher of Swedish and English with 20 years of experience teaching these subjects at an upper secondary school in Sweden. He teaches one English 6 class and two English 7 classes in the years 1-3. Daniel has a total of five classes of both English and Swedish. The classes vary in size ranging from 26 to 32 students.
4.4 Ethical considerations
Knowing how to phrase questions or comments is of crucial importance during an interview. Another important key feature is that the informant feels comfortable and at ease. The informants need to feel that they can share their opinions, thoughts, and reasons while at the same time being respected both as individuals and as professionals. Furthermore, what the interviewer needs to take into consideration is that the identities of the participants need to be anonymous during the interviews. This has been done by providing the participants with a pseudonym to keep their anonymity and simplifying the presentation of the results. Furthermore, the audio-recorded files will not be uploaded on any device and they will be deleted when the study is concluded.

To contact the informants, e-mails were sent to the teachers informing them regarding the aim of the study as well as the method of data collection. However, they did not have the chance to look at the interview questions beforehand since this could affect both their opinions and the results of the study. The teachers had to be as spontaneous as possible and reflect on the questions at that moment. The letter of consent is to be found in Appendix 3.

4.5 Limitations of the study
Certain limitations have to be considered when concluding the results of the study. The first limitation is the limited scope. Qualitative studies with a limited scope necessarily mean generalizability is restricted. However, while the generalizability of the study is limited, its findings provide a deeper understanding of the investigated issue. Moreover, research studies involving human judgment are challenging to reproduce since people mediate their own reasons and thoughts, which affects the reliability of the study. In other words, the main problem is subjectivity from both the informants and the researcher when analyzing and interpreting the interview responses (Denscombe 2014).
Another problem regarding the study is that the method of grounded theory, as presented in section 3.2, was on certain occasions challenging to apply due to the fact that the informants expressed conflicting reasons. Since the grounded theory approach creates theories from the teachers’ speculations, this made it difficult to compare the informants’ reasons directly with one another.

A third limitation is the validity of the study. The results of the study can be argued from an external validity point of view. External validity indicates if the results of this study can be generalized to a larger teacher population. While the results can be generalized and applied, human judgment differs from one individual to another meaning that all teachers do not perceive aspects the same. Internal validity, on the other hand, signifies how accurately the qualitative method measures what it intends to measure. The qualitative method of this study involves interviews based on features such as the informants’ emotions, feelings, and experiences. Additionally, Denscombe (2014) argues that it is challenging to determine the validity of the study when these types of interviews are carried out. The method accurately measures what it intends to measure; however, the content of the interviews can affect the validity in case the interviewees deviate from the topic.

Finally, the fourth limitation is whether a mixed-methods approach, including observations, would be more beneficial for the study. A mixed-methods approach provides a broader image of how, in this case, teachers say they act compared to how they actually act when assessing oral proficiency. Hence, this approach could be used as an asset; however, the problem is that it is difficult to accomplish this within the time frame. It would entail the need to develop several forms of data collection instruments. The instruments are, for instance, an observation scheme and a method for a compilation of observation data.
5 Results
The study’s aim is to analyze and investigate how teachers define, understand, and experience oral proficiency in the upper secondary EFL classroom. Moreover, the study seeks to analyze teachers’ conflicting perceptions regarding the assessment of students’ oral proficiency competences along with what problems they encounter and how they solve these problems. The results section is divided into the following sub-sections based on the process of transcribing the data: teachers’ understanding of oral proficiency, teachers’ experience of oral proficiency as well as assessment of oral proficiency where each sub-section presents sub-themes related to their headings. Furthermore, all sub-sections consist of authentic quotes from the teacher and the original quotes are found in Appendix 2. As an endnote, section 5.3 displays three figures in relation to teachers’ grading criteria, assessment situations and materials as well as problems and solutions when assessing. The figures act as a general overview whereas it also was done to ease the flow of the text.

5.1 Teachers’ understanding of oral proficiency
This section intends to answer the first research question concerning how the EFL teachers define and understand oral proficiency. When categorizing contrasting themes of the interviews, the following sub-themes could be identified relating to understanding oral proficiency: teachers’ perceptions of oral production along with teachers’ perceptions of oral interaction.

5.1.1 Teachers’ perceptions of oral production
To understand oral proficiency, the teachers explain that one has to understand oral production first since it is involved in the overall term. Oscar mentions that oral production refers to presenting material individually and points out that it is “a one-way communication in the first place”. Anna expresses that oral production is related to a more prepared activity as she illustrates an example in terms of “on Wednesday next week you will present an
argumentative speech”. She further clarifies that oral production gives one a chance to prepare and practice. Along with Anna, Adam relates oral production to a prepared activity such as “reading in front of a group” since this type of performance is completely prepared. He also highlights the fact that oral production is a matter of thoroughly preparing all parts of a presentation or a performance. Although Daniel refers to oral production as presenting or preparing an activity independently, he also centers his attention towards the national test. He outlines that presenting materials can relate to the speaking part of the national test since one receives specific information to investigate and, in turn, present that material individually. Additionally, all four teachers describe that “preparation” and “presentation” are two essential components of oral production. In other words, the teachers’ views on oral production are that they focus on the competences of the individual and their abilities to perform exclusively.

5.1.2 Teachers’ perceptions of oral interaction
As well as oral production, oral interaction is an essential part of oral proficiency according to the teachers. The informants point out that this is where true communication happens. Hence, the four EFL teachers interpret oral interaction as communication between people. Daniel views oral interaction as discussing certain topics in various situations. He illustrates that these discussions are not necessarily completely prepared and depicts that he uses seminars, discussions, guided and non-guided exercises as his main use of activities when practicing students’ oral interaction competences. In addition, Daniel values the aspect of spontaneous communication, which is when the teacher walks around the classroom making small talk with the students without them being aware of them practicing their oral interaction abilities. Anna takes a similar standpoint since she explains that oral interaction is constantly present in terms of “the spontaneous situations in the classroom when performing different types of exercises”. Making use of course books is also an aspect Anna mentions during her interview. When
using course books, she not only gets the students engaged in the lesson, it also activates their English language competences. She further explains that the students in need of guidance are often unsure of what they have to do and they have trouble deciding what they want to present. In these types of situations, Anna guides the students in terms of providing a topic of their interest. By using this method, each student gets the opportunity to practice their oral interaction abilities.

Adapting the language to the situation is mentioned by Oscar, however; unlike Anna, he does not make use of specific course- or textbooks. Instead, he uses features such as communication techniques. These techniques focus on, for instance, emphasizing the language level on a certain task or mentioning that the spontaneous situations in the classroom can either be on an informal or formal level. Oscar describes that he uses these techniques to depict what the language should look like in various situations and tasks. He further illustrates that the requirements increase as the students go from one grade to another which indicates that the students’ language use has to be developed.

5.2 Teachers’ experience of oral proficiency
In the upcoming section, the study’s second research question is accounted for regarding in which ways the EFL teachers experience oral proficiency. The process of categorizing themes resulted in the following sub-theme: Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety.

5.2.1 Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety
The phenomenon of foreign language speaking anxiety was noticed by two of the four EFL teachers. During his interview, Oscar mentions that several students have extreme difficulties standing in front of the class to present their work. He states that these students often perform well in class and do not find the language itself challenging, it is the situation that causes their anxiety. Oscar’s way of avoiding these problematic situations is to not let the students
who experience anxiety individually present in class. In addition, he points out that if the students, despite their anxiety, want to present in front of the class get the opportunity to do so while other students experiencing this phenomenon can present in other contexts instead. When the level of anxiety is making the students unable to present even in other contexts, Oscar describes that the students can record themselves at home and send in their audio-recording. Daniel also touches upon foreign language speaking anxiety during his interview. He expresses that many students are scared to speak up during class which results in them not speaking at all.

5.3 Assessment of oral proficiency

The following section will summarize and visualize the results of the study’s third and fourth research questions on how the EFL teachers assess students’ oral proficiency as well as what problems they encounter and how they solve these problems when assessing. The themes that emerged were: teachers’ grading criteria for assessing oral proficiency, assessment situations and materials as well as problems and solutions when assessing oral proficiency. To ease the flow, each sub-theme will display a figure regarding information that the teachers considered when assessing oral proficiency.
5.3.1 Teachers’ grading criteria for assessing oral proficiency

As illustrated in Figure 1, which represents examples of possible assessment criteria, the four EFL teachers take a number of different criteria into account when assessing students’ oral proficiency. Pronunciation is seen as an essential criterion since all teachers mentioned this during their interview. Interesting to notice is that the teachers do not make a distinction between the spoken English dialects. However, although the National Agency for Education (2011) does not mention the feature of pronunciation in the knowledge requirements, Daniel declares that he assesses this feature. He mentions:

1. Yes, when it comes to clarity. “Do I understand what they are saying?” […] Otherwise, it is uninteresting whether they have a Swedish intonation or something else. It does not matter what accent you have as long as I understand what you are saying. […] However, the main point must be that a non-native speaker can understand you, no matter where you come from and where they come from. You have to be able to meet and that requires sharpening your pronunciation as much as needed. (Daniel)
Despite the fact that the EFL teachers mention various grading criteria, pointing out the most important criteria when assessing is rather challenging due to all features above being vital. In relation to selecting a single feature that is more essential than the others, Oscar states that, in his opinion, it is rather impossible to point out a single instance. Instead, he views assessment as a holistic perspective meaning that all features are equally essential when solving a task and, in turn, assessing. He further explains that different situations decide what feature is the most fundamental, for instance, “how well you can make yourself understood, word choice, pronunciation, phraseology, and how well do you manage to interact in the context with others”. In addition, he describes that there are more features than those previously listed and refers to the central content and the knowledge requirements. They determine what should be assessed and what is critical to focus on when assessing, according to Oscar.

5.3.2 Assessment situations and materials
Figure 2 details various assessment situations and specific assessment materials which are mentioned by the EFL teachers. It also showcases aspects that might affect students’ oral proficiency abilities.
During the interviews, the teachers mention that they separate assessment situations into two contrasting categories: formal and informal situations. Oscar, who focuses more on informal assessment situations declares this by stating:

2. I am a lot for these informal assessment situations, that is to say, where the students sit and talk. They talk two and two or something or I join and talk with them without it [the conversation] being a concrete assessment situation. I constantly, during the course, form the idea of “what is it that the students are able to do concerning oral proficiency?” “How do they communicate and in what manner?” (Oscar)

However, although Oscar tends to focus on informal situations, he further explains that he does not make a distinction between formal and informal assessment situations since his task is to assess what the students comprehend when finishing the course. Daniel, on the other hand, reveals that there are more formal assessment opportunities. He claims that official assessment situations have to be designed in a way to provide the students a chance to demonstrate that they can perform in a relevant and valid manner. As an example, he illustrates the National tests since these function as formal assessment situations in which the students interact and discuss various tasks.
While Oscar and Daniel each focus on one type of assessment situation, Anna focuses more on specific students during an oral activity. Nevertheless, she does not tell which students she is focusing on nor does she explain what she is assessing during that specific activity. Adam, however, does not make a distinction between the two situations since he states that he assesses students’ performances based on what level they have as well as what they can enhance to reach a higher level.

In regards to what aspects can affect students’ oral proficiency skills, the EFL teachers are in unison with one another since they all mention factors such as having a bad day, tiredness or illness. Two of the four teachers, Oscar and Daniel, point out that students experiencing foreign language speaking anxiety also can affect their oral proficiency competences. Moreover, they explain that this phenomenon makes it challenging to assess these students’ proficiency level.

When displaying their thoughts and opinions on specific assessment materials, three teachers use rubrics provided by the National Agency for Education (2011) whereas one teacher creates his own rubrics instead. Daniel and Anna both use finished rubrics where Daniel asserts that he uses these rubrics when it comes to oral assessment. He explains that he listens to the recorded examples provided by the National Agency for Education (2011) and, in turn, compares them with what the students perform. Adam, on the contrary, claims using both example rubrics as well as the knowledge requirements. He describes:

3. I try to use the usual knowledge requirements and I also have one [rubric] to be able to arrange my notes. I decide that I have a content section, a linguistic section and I also try to direct my attention towards “what is it that I am looking for now?” since one cannot look at
everything. […] I structure my notes so that I can see how developed, varied, and with what kind of fluency they [the students] can express themselves regarding a content. (Adam)

While Daniel, Anna, and Adam all use rubrics specified by the National Agency for Education (2011), Oscar creates his own assessment rubrics. During his interview, he mentions an example in which he formulates four aspects that he will pay extra attention to and numbers the aspects 1-4 where number 1 indicates aspects of improvement and number 4 signifies that the student masters that specific area. He further explains that he uses a checklist rather than a rubric since checklists can be designed in a way in which certain concepts such as fluency and variation can be assessed. Moreover, he declares that this is a qualitative way of assessing since you establish particular aspects that will be considered during the assessment process.

5.3.3 Problems and solutions when assessing oral proficiency

In regards to the assessment process, teachers encounter problems and manage to find solutions. Figure 3 illustrates these issues and solutions accordingly.
The teachers all highlight different elements in relation to certain problems that can occur. Anna expresses her reflections on a problem concerning a student having low proficiency abilities:

4. That is if they [the students] have such low abilities that it [the communication] falls short. Then, it can be difficult to distinguish “is this an E or is it not?” And you can always ask a colleague for help with assessment by allowing them to also listen to a recording of an oral activity. Because it can be very, very difficult to see, or rather hear, whether it is a passing grade or not. (Anna)

In other words, Anna claims that students’ abilities can be a factor as to why assessment can be viewed as a challenging and difficult task. Adam and Daniel, on the other hand, focus on different aspects regarding problems when assessing. Adam states that one of the main problems is “having time to register everything”. He mentions that during oral proficiency activities, “you need to make a lot of notes in the present which results in not gaining all the information that is needed since you are not able to notice all features”. According to Adam, the overall problem is not having enough time to give the students “full credit” for what they do well. Daniel is in line with what Adam states as he declares that oral proficiency activities tend to go fast whereas you also have to take several essential features into consideration. When students perform oral proficiency activities, Daniel records the presentations in order to go back and listen to the students’ performances. During the process of listening to the presentations, Daniel explains that he listens to features such as content, language and structure. Moreover, he listens to the recordings multiple times since he focuses on different features each time. According to both teachers, the main problem is being able to register and process all features that are of importance since oral proficiency activities tend to go rather quickly.
In line with what Adam and Daniel state, Oscar mentions comparing oral proficiency with the general writing competence. He describes that “one can read what a student has produced several times yet one is only able to listen and hear what a student is presenting one time” (Oscar). This causes the teacher to make a judgment after only hearing the presentation once. During his interview, Oscar also delves deeper into the concept of recording the presentations but considers it to be too tricky and time-consuming.

In contrast to the problems within the assessment process, the four EFL teachers acknowledge certain solutions as well. For instance, Anna declares that when assessing according to the knowledge requirements, the process of assessing is simplified since one follows the concepts that have to be assessed. Two teachers that claim comparable solutions are Oscar and Adam. Oscar claims that he does not view the assessment of oral proficiency to be more challenging than other areas. Moreover, Oscar refers to his years in the teaching profession and points out that “you learn what it is you should look for and discover connections with the central content and the knowledge requirements when having more experience”. In line with Oscar, Adam also refers to his teaching experience and states that “when having more experience as a teacher, one becomes quite sure of how the assessment procedure functions”.

Lastly, Daniel differs in his opinions as to why the assessment procedure can be considered easy. He states that “when having a student who masters a high level of English, one is quickly aware of the high quality of their language use”. However, he comments that the students still need to fulfill the requirements concerning variation, vocabulary, fluency, and idiomaticity.
5.4 Summary

The informants claim that in order to understand oral proficiency, one has to understand oral production and oral interaction first. Oral production, according to the teachers, was perceived as a one-way communication where “preparation” and “presentation” occurred as two essential aspects. In other words, teachers focus on the competences of the individual and their own abilities to perform exclusively. Oral interaction, in turn, is where true communication happens and interpreted by the teachers as “communication between people”.

The phenomenon of foreign language speaking anxiety was only noticed by two of the four EFL teachers, Oscar and Daniel. They mention that many students experience this type of anxiety and that these particular students find it difficult to stand in front of the class and present their work. Their solutions to how these students can present material individually is by either providing other presentation settings or by recording themselves and sending in their audio-recording.

The assessment of oral proficiency consisted of the sub-sections: teachers’ grading criteria, assessment situations and materials as well as problems and solutions when assessing. In regards to the grading criteria, the teachers all mention pronunciation as an essential concept. However, the informants also stated that students’ fluency, variation and being able to get your message across are all important aspects which, in turn, complicates the process of narrowing down what is most essential when grading. When it comes to assessment situations and materials, the teachers divide the situations into formal and informal assessment situations. The informants refer formal situations to the national test whereas informal situations are referred to as only focusing on specific students during an oral presentation. Concerning certain aspects that might affect students’ oral proficiency skills, the teachers all
declared that these are, for instance, having a bad day, tiredness or illness. However, Oscar and Daniel also connected foreign language speaking anxiety to an aspect that could affect students’ proficiency competences. When focusing on different assessment materials, Anna, Adam, and Daniel all used rubrics provided by the National Agency for Education (2011), while Oscar created his own. Finally, the last sub-section focused on problems and solutions regarding assessment. According to all informants, having time to register everything is considered to be the main problem. A solution, on the other hand, is following the knowledge requirements as well as the central content to make assessment easier. Adam and Oscar referred to their experience in the teaching profession since having more experience contributes to becoming quite sure of how the assessment procedure functions.
6 Discussion

The following section will primarily discuss the findings that were found among the topics presented in the results. Moreover, suggestions will be given regarding further research in this field.

6.1 Content discussion

The aim of the study was to analyze and investigate how teachers define, understand, and experience oral proficiency in the upper secondary EFL classroom. The study also sought to analyze teachers’ conflicting perceptions when it comes to the assessment of students’ oral proficiency along with what problems they encounter and how they solve these problems. To facilitate the discussion as well as the understanding of how the aim of the study has been reached, this section is divided into three sub-sections aligned with the research questions: teachers’ definitions and understanding of oral proficiency, teachers’ experiences of oral proficiency as well as teachers’ assessment of oral proficiency.

6.1.1 Teachers’ definitions and understanding of oral proficiency

In order to understand the broad term ‘oral proficiency,’ the teachers explained that understanding oral production and oral interaction is of great importance. Oral production, as clarified by the teachers, indicates a one-way communication. According to all four informants, oral production is associated with terms such as ‘preparation’ and ‘presentation’ and focuses thereby on the competences of the individual and their ability to perform exclusively. Oral interaction was by all teachers interpreted as communication between people. The results of the study further showed that the EFL teachers expressed similar reflections regarding this term since they stated that oral interaction focuses on adapting the language to the situation. Furthermore, they mentioned that oral interaction centers its attention on different communication techniques in order to depict what the language level is in
different situations and tasks. This is in line with the definition August (2008) previously claimed.

6.1.2 Teachers’ experiences of oral proficiency
Two of the four teachers outlined a phenomenon called Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety and mentioned the importance of taking this aspect into consideration when teaching. The other two teachers, on the other hand, did not mention this specific aspect during their interviews. Yalçın’s and İnceçay’s (2014: 2620) study showed that this specific phenomenon is relevant for oral proficiency since it has a negative effect on students’ oral proficiency abilities. Even though most language teachers are aware of the existence of this circumstance, many teachers experience difficulties in knowing how to deal with this phenomenon, as the two teachers in this study also stated. In other words, it is difficult for a teacher to determine whether a student is experiencing foreign language speaking anxiety since students might show this in various manners. However, what can be stated is that teachers can work with minimizing a students’ language anxiety either by not letting these students present in big groups or by incorporating small oral proficiency activities throughout the lesson. Additionally, Aichhorn and Puck (2017) assert that a general lack of interactional competence can create a language barrier, which might culminate in speaking anxiety.

6.1.3 Teachers’ assessment of oral proficiency
The results of the study showed that the EFL teachers focus on a number of different criteria when assessing students’ oral proficiency, the main one being pronunciation. This differs from what Brown et al. (2005) present in their study since they state that upper secondary school language teachers tend to concentrate more on sociolinguistic and strategic competence, such as adapting the language to social situations. However, although the teachers in this study are in unison regarding what criteria they focus on when assessing,
the Swedish curricular documents lack specific guidelines for oral proficiency assessment which can result in inconsistent and unreliable grading.

The interviews moreover showed that, during the assessment of students’ oral proficiency, the informants focused on different assessment situations, such as formal and informal situations. While formal situations occur more frequently according to one teacher, another teacher implied that there are more informal assessment situations. This is in line with Apelgren and Oscarson (2011) since their study showed that each teacher views the aspect of assessment settings individually.

The results of this study also displayed that there are certain features that might affect students’ oral proficiency skills. All four teachers declared that having a bad day, tiredness or illness have a negative effect on language proficiency. The study further showed that two of the four informants experience the phenomenon of foreign language speaking anxiety to have an effect on students’ oral proficiency competences. In turn, they stated that this phenomenon challenges the assessment process. These results show a correlation between Rea-Dickens’ (2004: 253) statements since teachers tend to use their own standards and interpretations in relation to what factors can affect a student’s language performance.

A final interesting result that emerged during the interviews is related to the problems and solutions when assessing oral proficiency. While certain teachers addressed the students’ abilities as to why assessment can be viewed as challenging, other teachers focused on their own abilities and having time to register everything. The teachers’ acknowledgements differ from Apelgren’s and Oscarson’s (2011) study since they mention that the vagueness of the knowledge requirements might be a potentially challenging area when assessing. In addition, and as stated by Sundqvist et al. (2018) and Frisch
(2015), assessing oral proficiency can be a challenging process since conversations and discussions are difficult to control as well as that the teachers are only able to assess a certain number of features.

6.2 Suggestions for further research

After analyzing the reflections of the EFL teachers, one realizes that the assessment process varies among the informants. The fact that all teachers have 20+ years of experience shows that teachers can still assess the students differently. However, the limited scope as well as a limited approach makes it necessary for future research to further investigate if adopting a mixed-method approach along with an unlimited scope would provide contrasting insights when assessing students’ oral proficiency in Swedish upper secondary schools. Moreover, this study encourages more research to be done within the field of assessment with the aim of facilitating, for instance, teachers’ work in providing precise guidelines on how to adequately assess students’ oral proficiency competences.
7 Conclusion and implications for the teacher practice

The study was based on analyzing and investigating how teachers define, understand, and experience oral proficiency in the upper secondary EFL classroom. It also sought to analyze teachers’ conflicting perceptions regarding the assessment of students’ oral proficiency along with what problems they encounter and how they solve these problems. In order to reach the aim, the following research questions were asked and explored: ‘How do the EFL teachers define and understand oral proficiency?’ ‘In what ways do the EFL teachers experience oral proficiency?’ ‘How do the EFL teachers assess students’ oral proficiency?’ ‘Based on the teachers' assessment of students’ oral proficiency, what problems do they encounter and how do they solve these problems?’

The conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the four EFL teachers experienced the assessment process to be a problematic area since it can be viewed in a number of different ways. During the interviews, two out of four informants mentioned and referred to their experience in the teacher profession. The fact that they referred to their extensive professional experience as an important asset when assessing oral proficiency, entails that this can be a particularly challenging area for new teachers, who lack the necessary practical know-how. One of the implications of this insight for the teacher practice could be that new teachers may need a more experienced mentor in order to be able to adequately assess students’ oral proficiency.

The results show that during assessment situations, the teachers expressed focusing on aspects such as pronunciation, fluency, variation, interaction, content, and vocabulary. A general conclusion that can be drawn from the results is that the informants are relatively acquainted with what specific factors to focus on when assessing students’ oral proficiency. On the other hand, they also seemed to include irrelevant factors such as attendance and
motivation in the assessment process. This type of assessment occurs since the knowledge requirements do not provide explicit guidelines on what to include in the assessment process.
References


Appendix 1 – Interview protocol

Interview guide

Tema: Bakgrund

1. Har du din lärarlegitimation?
2. Hur länge har du arbetat som lärare? (antal år inom yrket)
3. Hur många elever undervisar du? (årskurser, gruppstorlek)
5. Hur ser en engelskalektion ut när du undervisar? Hur såg din senaste lektion ut?

Tema: Muntlig språkfärdighet och bedömning

1. Vad anser du vara muntlig språkfärdighet i engelska?
2. Vilka medel använder du när eleverna ska träna sina muntliga språkfärdigheter? Motivera varför just dessa medel. Vad tar du till för material?
4. Anser du det är viktigt att läraren har bra kunskaper vad gäller muntlig engelska? Varför?
5. Hur ser du på elevers muntliga språkfärdighet i engelska i Sverige? Vad är deras generella svagheter eller styrkor?

10. Vad anser du vara svårast med att bedöma elevernas muntliga språkfärdighet? Varför?


12. Procentmässigt, hur stor roll väger det nationella provet in i det slutgiltiga betyget? Varför?


Tema: Muntlig språkfärdighet i förhållande till kursplanen i engelska

(utdrag ur kursplanen förekommer i samband med frågorna)

1. Hur tolkar du formuleringarna i kunskapskraven för de olika betygsnivåerna vad gäller värdeord såsom relativt?

2. Hur tolkar du benämningen “flyt” i kunskapskraven? Vad innebär det enligt dig?

3. Hur lätt eller svårt är det att bedöma vilket betygssteg i kunskapskraven en elev ligger på gällande en muntlig språkprestation?


5. Enligt dig, vad innebär skillnaden mellan “muntlig framställning” respektive “muntlig interaktion”?

7. Tar du hjälp av specifika medel vad gäller bedömningen av elevernas muntliga språkfärdighet, förutom kunskapskraven? Vilka är de och hur ser de ut? (T.ex. egna matriser)
Appendix 2 – Teachers’ quotes


4. Det är om de har så svaga kunskaper att det brister. Då kan det vara jättesvårt att “är detta ett E eller inte?” Och man kan alltid ta hjälp av en kollega med bedömningen genom att låta dem lyssna på en inspelning av en muntlig aktivitet. För ibland kan det vara väldigt,
väldigt svårt att se, eller höra rättare sagt, är detta ett E eller inte.

(Anna)
Hej,


Detta mejl är en förfrågan till dig att medverka i studien genom att delta i en intervju där jag kommer ställa frågor som behandlar detta ämne. Medverkan kommer självklart vara anonymt och du som intervjuperson har rätt att avbryta medverkan när som helst om så önskas. Intervjun beräknas ta circa 1 timme.

Med vänliga hälsningar,

Eva