The influence of classmates on students’ willingness to communicate in English

A study based on teacher and student views and experiences at a Swedish upper secondary school
Abstract

The syllabus for upper secondary school states that interaction and communication are important for students’ oral production skills development. Also, the contemporary view on learning is that people learn a language by using it. This study examines how students and a teacher experience the ways in which classmates influence each other’s willingness to speak English in the classroom, if they believe it affects their oral production skills development, and moreover whether they think that some sort of ability grouping could support oral production skills development. The study was carried out among a total of eight students and one teacher at an upper secondary school located in Southern Sweden, using a qualitative methodology based on personal interviews. Four English 6 students belong to the natural science program, and four English 7 Cambridge Advanced English students belong to various academic programs. The teacher teaches both courses. The results showed that classmates is the factor in the classroom which affects students’ willingness to speak English the most in their different language proficiency, personality, attitude, focus, willingness to communicate in English, and relationship with each other. The students experience that these differences between them often affect their WTC negatively and thereby their oral production skills development. They want to interact with other students who are at their level or slightly above them, who want to speak English, who share the communication space, and who take the lessons seriously. Therefore, the students and teacher have a positive attitude toward some form of ability grouping in all English courses.

Key words

Ability grouping, English language teaching, Upper secondary school, Willingness to communicate

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1 Introduction

Traditionally, language teaching has focused on helping students master various grammatical structures. However, today’s language teaching focuses on communicative proficiency according to Richards and Rodgers (2001:153). Accordingly, Estling Vannestål (2007:13) argues that there has been a shift from focus on form to focus on function. This means that interaction and communication have become important keywords in contemporary language teaching. The latest view on learning is that people learn together with others by interacting and communicating with each other. This shift in focus can also be noticed in the syllabus for the English subject, which stresses the importance of production and interaction, which means expressing oneself and interacting with others in speech. The syllabus furthermore states that teaching as far as possible should be conducted in English (Skolverket, 2011:53).

The fact that the syllabus stresses the importance of students and the teacher only using the target language in the classroom makes it clear that large amounts of input and output are vital for the students’ development. Several second language (henceforth L2) researchers such as Swain (2005:471) and Ellis (2008:274ff.) have emphasized the importance of interaction in L2 acquisition. However, for such interaction to work and develop the students’ communicative proficiency, students actually need to be willing to use the target language during the lessons. Harmer (2007:345) claims that there are several factors which can contribute to students being reluctant to use the target language in the classroom such as class mix, choice of topic, organisation of the task, and sometimes just the natural reluctance of some students to speak and to take part.

There are several factors that need to be considered in order to establish why students might be reluctant to speak English. However, this essay will only focus on one factor, the effect that classmates can have on each other. My interest in how classmates affect each other’s willingness to communicate (henceforth WTC) in English arose from observations I made during my teacher practice in the English subject where the communication worked well in one English 7 Cambridge Advanced English (henceforth CAE) class and less well in two English 5 classes and two English 6 classes that I was a part of. All students in the English 7 CAE class were willing to speak English and they seemed to be at the same ability level. The result was that the interaction and communication worked very well. I moreover noticed that the other classes consisted of some students who were willing to speak English and some students who were not so
willing to speak English. These classes also had students of various ability levels. The result of the oral production in these classes was that all students tended to speak more Swedish with each other when they were asked to collaborate in English.

Since it is vital for oral production skills development to use the language, these observations made me interested in how classmates affect each other regarding their WTC in English. Moreover, I became interested in how WTC in English affects the development of students’ oral production skills, and whether some sort of ability grouping could be an alternative to support the students’ oral production skills development. It is important for teachers to know why students are reluctant or willing to speak English with each other in order to be able to plan lessons so that all students can develop their oral production skills, regardless of ability level or WTC in English.

This essay will concentrate on the communication between students in the classroom and will more specifically focus on how students and their teacher experience the effects that peers have on WTC in English with each other in the classroom.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate how students and their teacher experience the effects that peers have on students’ WTC in English with each other, how they think that this can affect the development of the students’ oral production skills, and moreover whether they think that some sort of ability grouping can be beneficial for the development. This study has been conducted by using qualitative methods. Interviews were used with eight students and one teacher at one upper secondary school located in Southern Sweden.

This essay sets out to answer the following research questions:

- In what ways do classmates influence each other’s WTC in English during the lessons according to the students and the teacher?
- What kind of classmate do the students claim they would want to interact with if they were free to choose and why?
- How do the students and the teacher feel about ability grouping in the English subject in order to support the students’ oral production skills development?
2 Theoretical background

This section will present the background and previous research done on the topic of this study. Firstly, it will present the communicative perspective on language teaching with regards to how cognitive and social factors are combined when learning a language. Secondly, students have to be willing to speak English to develop their oral skills, and therefore, previous research done on WTC will be presented. Finally, previous research done on peer effects and ability grouping will be presented to illustrate the question of mixed ability classrooms and how it can affect academic outcomes.

2.1 A communicative perspective on language teaching

2.1.1 Focus on form and function

According to Estling Vannestål (2007:13), a change in focus on how English should be taught in Swedish schools has occurred during the last few decades. She claims that there has been a shift from focus on form to focus on function. Hewings and Hewings (2005:8) describe the formal approach as a set of rules where all possible grammatical structures in a language are specified and the primary focus is on these grammatical structures and their relationship to one another. The authors moreover claim that the functional approach to grammar is concerned with how people use different grammatical structures in various contexts. The functional approach does not make a difference between grammatical and ungrammatical forms, but is rather based on the appropriateness of a form in a particular communicative context. Abrahamsson (2009:50f.) agrees with Estling Vannestål (2007) and he also claims that during the last 40 years, language teaching has gone from teaching which consisted of imitation and translation tasks with focus on form, to teaching which now consists of interaction and creative language production with more focus on the function of the language.

This focus on function can be noticed in the syllabus for the English subject, since it stresses the importance of developing good oral production skills. The aim of the subject which includes English 5, 6, and 7 states that Teaching of English should aim at helping students to develop knowledge of language and the surrounding world so that they have the ability, desire and confidence to use English in different situations and for different purposes (Skolverket, 2011:53). The syllabus furthermore states that production and interaction means [...] expressing oneself and interacting with others in speech and writing, as well as adapting their language to different situations, purposes
and recipients (Ibid, p.53). Students should furthermore [...] develop their ability to use different strategies to support communication and to solve problems when language skills are inadequate, and [...] interact in speech and writing, and to produce spoken language and texts of different kinds, both on their own and together with others, using different aids and media (Ibid, p.53.). The syllabus furthermore stresses the importance of input and output stating that Teaching should as far as possible be conducted in English (Ibid, p.53.). Lundahl (2012:134) claims that interaction and communication have become key components in language learning since the contemporary view of learning is that language is a tool for learning, and that this puts the dialogue and collaboration between students in focus. He also argues that cognitive and social factors are combined when learning a language.

2.1.2 The cognitive perspective

The cognitive perspective focuses on how people understand, learn, memorize, think, and solve problems. The theory claims that people do not only learn from their own mistakes, but by using their common sense they can also learn from the mistakes and perceptions of others (Lundgren et al, 2014:156). Several cognitive models emphasize the importance of interaction, and factors such as input, intake and output have been central to L2 models (Lundahl, 2012:131ff.). Krashen (1995:56f.) claims that language development can be explained by comprehensible input. He argues that speaking is not important for language acquisition since people acquire from what they hear or read and not from what they say. The best way of teaching people how to speak is by focusing on listening and reading and the spoken language will develop on its own (Krashen and Terrell, 1995).

However, other L2 researchers such as Swain (2005:471) claim that output is of great importance for the language development and argue that input alone is insufficient to ensure that language learners achieve high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence. Swain (2005:474ff.) who introduced an output hypothesis argues that L2 acquisition takes place by using language in both speech and writing. She claims that people become aware of their language gaps when they use the target language. Swain has moreover identified three functions of output which are a noticing function, a hypothesis-testing function and a metalinguistic function. The noticing function is about learners noticing language gaps in their knowledge, and noticing that they cannot say what they intended to say. The hypothesis-testing function can provide the learner with
opportunities to test different ways of saying the same thing and also the opportunity to search for linguistic knowledge when they need to find a solution to their language gap. Additionally, the metalinguistic function can encourage learners to intentionally reflect upon language and also consciously think about what they can and cannot say.

Both input and output then are vital to L2 acquisition. Ellis (2008:423) has summarised the most important components in the cognitive process which begins with L2 input which is the language that surrounds us, followed by noticed input which is the language we notice. Comprehended input is the language we understand, and intake is when language is transformed in our short-term-memory and meets our already existing language. Knowledge which has not yet been integrated in our long-term-memory is called explicit knowledge, while implicit knowledge is knowledge we can use since it has ‘stuck’ in our long-term-memory. Finally, L2 output is when we use this language ourselves.

2.1.3 The socio-cultural perspective

The socio-cultural perspective stresses that learning first of all is social, since it takes place between individuals and with the support of each other, and then it becomes cognitive so the individual can use the language on his or her own (Lundahl, 2012:134). The emphasis is on collaboration between people and the importance of interaction and communication (Lundgren et al, 2014:181). L2 researcher Michael Long (cited in Lundahl, 2012:202) argues that language development is a result of interaction with others. When a person who has knowledge of the language interacts with a person who is learning it, the person learning the language will get the language support that he or she needs, which will support the inner processes that lead to language development.

Long’s (cited in Lundahl, 2012:202) argument is in line with Vygotsky (1978) and his term Zone of Proximal Development (henceforth ZPD). With this term, Vygotsky claimed that when people master a skill, they are also close to mastering something new. He argued that new knowledge is always within our reach, but to be able to master something new, we need help from someone who has already mastered the skills. Lundahl (2012:209) states that teachers need to know their students well to be able to teach within their ZPD. Students need to be given a challenge, but it should not be too difficult, because this may take them outside their ZPD and then they will not be able to obtain any new knowledge. He moreover claims that scaffolding from the teacher is a
way of helping students to gain new knowledge, but scaffolding can also be collaborative between students. Students can give each other support when they interact with each other, reasoning together to come up with a solution to a problem. Scaffolding is here a process where the teacher or a more competent peer helps students within their ZPD to reach higher levels of competence than they could achieve unaided. Following the scaffolding metaphor, this help then tappers off as it becomes unnecessary (Harmer, 2007:60).

Activity theory is also central to the socio-cultural perspective. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that linguistic interaction between individuals in a social group is an activity since it is a process that connects the outer world with the inner world so that the individual finally can master a task on his or her own. He argued that what we learn is decided by our surrounding world and by how we choose to engage in these activities. Lundahl (2012:210) furthermore states that the socio-cultural perspective is about how individuals act in relation to other individuals and the surrounding world, where the individuals act and why the individuals act the way they do. Attitudes and motivation can be seen as dynamic and changing cognitive and social forces. This means that students in a language classroom are driven by different kinds of motivation, and they have different experiences from their previous language teaching.

2.1.4 Communicative language teaching

The cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives have influenced an approach called *Communicative language teaching* (henceforth CLT). Richards and Rodgers (2001:153) state that the goal of language teaching today is to develop communicative competence rather than mastering different language forms. The focus on communication in language teaching is an approach which both Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Harmer (2007) claim has the aim of improving students’ ability to communicate. Moreover, Littlewood (1981:89) argues that a communicative approach in language teaching opens up a wider perspective on language since it not only makes the learner focus on structures, but also on the communicative function these structures have. Harmer (2007:69) claims that an essential belief within CLT is that plentiful exposure to language in use and several opportunities to use the target language are vital for the students’ development.
Richards and Rodgers (2001:166) claim that CLT is a cooperative approach and not an individualistic one, which means that failed or successful communication is not a single speaker’s fault or accomplishment, but a shared responsibility. Harmer (2007:69) argues that activities in CLT aim at involving students in realistic communication, where the goal of completing the task successfully is just as important as the accuracy of language use. For the activities to be communicative, Harmer suggests that the students should have a desire to communicate, there should be a communicative purpose, there should be focus on content and not form, the language should be varied, the teacher should not intervene, and there should not be any material control (Harmer, 2007:70).

2.2 Willingness to communicate

It seems clear that communication and interaction are vital for L2 acquisition, but the communicative approach depends on students being willing to actually use the target language during the lessons.

2.2.1 Defining willingness to communicate

Recently, an increased emphasis on communication and interaction has developed as an essential part of L2 learning. In this respect, Kang (2005:278) claims that if the assumption is that more interaction leads to more language development and learning, then WTC needs to be emphasized in L2 pedagogy. There are different perspectives on what influences WTC such as the trait-like predisposition perspective, which McCroskey and Richmond (1990:21ff.) claim is the tendency of an individual to initiate communication when free to do so. WTC is here considered to be personality-based and the individual variables that have been found to influence WTC are perceived communicative competence, communication anxiety, sex, age, and attitudes towards the international community. However, Kang (2005:279) claims that more recent perspectives on WTC challenge the trait-like predisposition perspective. Here, WTC is seen as including situational variables. These are variables such as interlocutor, topic and conversational context. Kang (2005) therefore suggests a definition of WTC as:

\[
\text{Willingness to communicate (WTC) is an individual’s volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation, which can vary according to interlocutor(s), topic, and conversational context, among other potential situational variables.}
\]

(Kang, 2005:291).
Kang (2005:291) argues in his study of situational WTC that WTC in an L2 can dynamically emerge and fluctuate during a conversation. WTC changes from moment to moment due to the situation and does not only depend entirely on the personality of the speaker. Also MacIntyre et al (1998) claim that WTC is influenced by situational variables and define L2 WTC as *A readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2* (MacIntyre et al, 1998: 547).

MacIntyre et al (1998:547) have illustrated in a pyramid model consisting of six layers the way in which different variables can influence an individual’s WTC. The sixth layer includes *intergroup climate and personality*, and the fifth contains *intergroup attitudes, social situation and communicative competence*. The fourth layer covers *interpersonal motivation, intergroup motivation and L2 self-confidence*, and the third includes *desire to communicate with a specific person and state of communicative self-confidence*. The second layer is *willingness to communicate* and finally, the first layer is the communicative behaviour which is *L2 use*. Kang (2005:279) claims that the pyramid model by MacIntyre (1998) and his colleagues together with his own study on situational WTC, indicate that situational variables are the most important ones to investigate when studying WTC in L2.

### 2.2.2 Previous research on WTC

Cao and Philp (2006:487) have investigated oral behaviour in whole class, group and dyadic interaction among L2 learners at university level by using observations, interviews and questionnaires. They conclude that a number of factors contribute to the students’ WTC, such as group size, familiarity with the interlocutors, interlocutor participation, familiarity with topics under discussion, self-confidence, medium of communication and cultural background. The students in the study preferred interacting with a small number of interlocutors and thought their WTC was greater when they interacted with friends compared to classmates they did not consider as friends. The authors conclude that their results show the dynamic nature of WTC in an L2.

Eddy-U (2015:52f.) interviewed students from two universities in China about their WTC in L2 in group tasks. She came to the conclusion that WTC has to do with factors such as the atmosphere in the classroom, the group members, the ability levels of the group members, and also the possibility for all group members to be engaged in the activity regardless of L2 ability. The students moreover seemed to think that choosing
other students they wanted to interact with by themselves would increase their participation compared to being assigned to a group by the teacher. Eddy-U (2015:52f.) does however argue that teachers should think about not pairing less skilled students with stronger students when deciding the groups, because the findings of the study suggest that it can demotivate stronger students and also reduce their WTC. Mirosław and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2015:8) also carried out a similar project where they interviewed Polish students and came to the conclusion that factors such as relationship with the conversational partners, capacity to generate own ideas, the role of the topic and the presence of the teacher influenced students’ WTC. These authors also argue that teachers need to think about not pairing self-confident high ability students with less skilled students since there is a risk that the high ability students will dominate the whole interaction, which can demotivate the other participants’ WTC.

Another study by Yu (2015:17) also came to a similar conclusion when she paired up students with low and high WTC to see how they affected each other’s WTC. She suggests that WTC is dynamic since it is jointly constructed by the participants in the communicative task. Yu (2015:17) claims that students with different WTC in a group have the possibility to pull each other up or down. Her results showed that students with low WTC did not increase their number of words or turn taking when they interacted with students with high WTC. Her explanation is that students with high WTC intrude on the communication space of the students with low WTC and that students with low WTC rely on the students with high WTC to finish the task and do not feel any pressure to participate and be orally active themselves. She argues that students with low WTC need to interact with each other instead in order to be more engaged in solving the task. She furthermore claims that this will put more pressure on their oral production which will develop their oral skills more.

2.3 Peer effects and ability grouping

Since students have different WTC as a result of various factors that affect them, classrooms can consist of a range of students with low and high WTC. This creates mixed participation engagement. Harmer (2007:127) argues that there is a need for differentiation in mixed ability classrooms, since adapting teaching to suit all individuals is extremely difficult, and especially in large classes.
2.3.1 Ability grouping

Ability grouping is described in the Oxford Dictionary as *The organization of pupils into groups according to their perceived ability (either in different schools, or within the same school or class), so that learners of a similar proficiency may be taught together at the same level* (Oxford Dictionaries [www]). Wallby et al (2001:37) describe a group consisting of people with the same ability level as a homogeneous group. The pros and cons of ability grouping have been highly debated over the years and Wallby et al (2001:112ff.) claim that the results from research done on it are ambiguous and difficult to interpret. The authors conclude that the question of whether ability grouping is good or bad remains unanswered. Also Goldberg et al (1966:167ff.) argue that ability grouping is neither good nor bad, since the authors’ research showed that ability grouping only produces small positive changes in students’ academic achievements, but it is not associated with any negative effects. Likewise, Robert Slavin (cited in Engström, 1996:5f.) claims that the effect of ability grouping is equal to zero, but there is no evidence that low ability students are negatively affected by it.

Slavin who has reviewed research done on ability grouping in secondary schools argues that the arguments for and against ability grouping have not changed over the years. The pros from research done are that students can make progress in line with their own ability, the teaching can be adjusted to the students’ needs, it reduces failure, motivated students will keep their interest and motivation, and will not get bored by low ability students, low ability students become more active when they do not have to be in the shadows of the high ability students, it makes the job for the teacher easier, and it creates opportunities for individual teaching of small and slow groups (Engström, 1996:5f.) [my translation]. The cons according to Slavin are that low ability students need the presence of high ability students in order to get stimuli and encouragement, students are marked as stupid, teachers cannot, or do not have the time to differentiate the work for different ability levels, and teachers do not like the slow groups (Engström, 1996:5f.) [my translation].

Harmer (2007:127) stresses the need for differentiation in the classroom suggesting the possibility of making ability grouping within the class. He claims that it can be done if the teacher recognises the different ability levels and plans the lessons with the aim of challenging the individual students. The question is however how the teacher can achieve this in a realistic way since it needs to be feasible to perform. Harmer suggests
that teachers can group specific students with each other for specific purposes and assign the different groups with different tasks in order to challenge all students.

**2.3.2 Previous research on peer effects and ability grouping**

The basic idea of peer effects is that group actions or attributes can influence individual decisions and outcomes, such as educational achievement (Lavy et al, 2012:3). Burke and Sass (2013:77f.) who investigated peer effects in all public schools in Florida from grade three to ten during a period of six years argue that some degree of ability grouping could sometimes be preferred in classrooms with a broad mix of students. Their results suggest that middling ability students prefer being placed with high ability students, high ability students prefer being placed with either other high ability students or low ability students instead of middling ability students, and low ability students prefer being placed with middle ability students. The authors claim that if teachers want to raise the achievement level among the low ability students, they should be placed with others who are slightly above their own ability level instead of placing them with the top students. Burke and Sass (2013:77f.) argue that the intellectual distance between these two groups is too large for them to gain any positive peer effects from each other.

Lavy et al (2012:28f.) also came to a similar conclusion in their research about peer effects in secondary schools in England where they conclude that low achievers have negative effects on their classmates’ learning outcomes. Their results also show that high achievers do not seem to have any significant effects on the academic outcomes of their fellow classmates. The authors’ final conclusion is that students’ academic performances can improve by making the classes more homogeneous by excluding both more skilled and less skilled peers. Another study made by Arnar Vardardottir (2013:120) in an Icelandic high school also suggests that students who belong to high ability classes will increase their academic achievements more compared to having belonged to a normal class with both low and high ability students. The author explains how students in Iceland are divided into high ability classes and normal classes and her results show that if a student with a grade just below the high ability class is assigned to the high ability class instead of the normal class, the student increases his or her exam results and year grades. This suggests that increasing academic ability among peers will also increase the individual student’s academic performance.

Finally, a study on peer effects made by Schneeweis and Winter-Ebmer (2006:406ff.) also concludes that some kind of ability grouping can sometimes be more beneficial
compared to having classes with mixed ability levels. The authors investigated peer effects for 15 and 16-year-old students in Austria by using data from PISA 2000 and 2003 in reading and mathematics. The results show that positive peer effects are highest for the low and median achievers in reading which means that a heterogeneous classroom will benefit the low achievers the most. In mathematics, the peer effects were not as obvious, and the results show that a heterogeneous classroom is good for high achieving students but less good for the low achieving students. The authors’ solution to this diversity in peer effects between the subjects was to have heterogeneous classes, but allow smaller working groups at different levels for specific subjects.

2.4 Summary

This section has discussed the communicative perspective on language teaching with regards to how cognitive and social factors are combined when learning a language, what factors affect the WTC, and how peer effects and ability grouping can affect academic outcomes. There has been a shift from focus on form to focus on function in contemporary language teaching, which is clearly shown in the syllabus for the English subject. This has resulted in interaction and communication becoming key words in L2 teaching. It is however not always simple to get students to communicate in the target language, and their WTC is influenced by various factors. Recent research emphasizes situational variables as the most important ones, such as group size, topic, the participation from the interlocutors and the ability level of the interlocutors. Previous studies also stress the problem with pairing students with low and high WTC with each other since they sometimes can affect each other negatively. Previous research on peer effects also shows that high ability and low ability students sometimes can affect each other negatively since peers seem to have a great impact on each other. It is suggested that some sort of ability grouping is to be preferred in some groups and subjects even though previous studies on ability grouping claim that it is neither good nor bad since it does not generate any large positive effects.

3 Material and method

This section will describe the material and methods used in this essay.
3.1 Method

A qualitative method was chosen to collect data to this study. More specifically the data consisted of interviews with eight students (See Appendix 1) and one teacher who is the students’ English teacher (See Appendix 2). The aim of this study was to investigate how students and their teacher experience that peers affect each other’s willingness to speak English with each other, how they think that this can affect the development of the students’ oral production skills and moreover whether they think that some sort of ability grouping can be beneficial for development. Therefore, a qualitative method was the most suitable one to use, since the aim was to find out about the students’ and the teacher’s own experiences, opinions and feelings. Denscombe (2009:398) claims that the results and theories that the qualitative methods generate are entrenched in reality, since the material and analyses have their roots in the social environment. Moreover, the reason for choosing interviews instead of questionnaires was because the study aimed to get answers about why the students and the teacher think and feel the way they do rather than getting answers about what they think and feel. However, due to this small number of informants, no generalisations of the population can be made.

The interviews carried out were semi-structured. Denscombe (2009:234f.) states that the difference between structured and semi-structured interviews is that the semi-structured interview also has a list of questions like the structured one, but the interviewer is flexible when it comes to the order of the questions. The answers to the questions are open and the emphasis is on the interviewee developing his or her answers. Since the interviewer is flexible with the questions, questions that are not on the list can be added if the interviewee says something new that can be of interest to the interviewer.

Furthermore, these interviews were personal, which according to Denscombe (2009:235) is a meeting between an informant and a researcher. He claims that the advantage of using personal interviews is that the researcher only has one person’s ideas and thoughts to explore, and only one person to lead through the interview. Another advantage is that it is easier to transcribe a personal interview compared to a group interview since there is only one voice to recognise. The choice for using personal interviews and not group interviews is because I believe that students will dare to be more honest if it is only me who is listening to them and not their classmates as well. My opinion is that some of the questions can be sensitive to answer in front of
classmates, which means that the students might not dare to be totally honest when they answer the questions.

There were in total eight students and one teacher used in this study. The teacher interviewed was the one teaching the students in English. The choice of students to interview was made consciously since I wanted students from one class where the communication worked well, and students from one class where the communication did not work that well to be able to compare the students’ answers from these opposite classes. I also wanted to interview both students who speak a lot of English during the lessons, and students who do not speak that much English during the lessons in order to get opinions both from students with high and low WTC. The teacher helped me to select these students, since she knows them well.

The interviews were carried out during the students’ English lessons in a small separate room which was close to the students’ classroom. The teacher interview was carried out during her working day. All interviews were conducted in Swedish which is the shared first language of the interviewer and informants. This was done to avoid misunderstandings and in order to allow informants to develop their thoughts since they might have had problems expressing themselves in English. Moreover, if the interviews had been conducted in English, they would probably have taken longer time since the informants are not as fluent in English as they are in Swedish.

Each interview took 40-45 minutes and all interviews were recorded with my own mobile. The interviewees gave their consent to being recorded before the interview started and signed an ethical agreement (See Appendix 3 and section 3.2 below). The advantage with using a mobile to record with is that it is easy to transfer the recording to the computer afterwards to be able to listen to the material. An advantage with recording interviews is the fact that it is easier to concentrate on the conversation and the interviewee instead of taking notes of everything that is being said at the same time. Another positive aspect is that the interviewer afterwards can listen to the interview several times and also listen to how the interviewees answer questions, and not only listen to what they say. The recording function on the mobile was tested one time before the actual interviews were held in order to test the quality of the sound. On the other hand, one negative aspect with recording interviews is that the informants might be affected by the presence of a recording device and also by the interviewer. Labov
argues with his term *observer’s paradox* that the researcher can never know how he or she affects the informants.

### 3.2 Ethical considerations

When interviewing students, there are some ethical aspects to take into consideration. I have considered the *Research board’s ethical code* which is supposed to protect the informant in research in terms of four aspects, *information demand, consent, confidentiality* and *usage*. These four aspects have been summarised by Stensmo (2002:26f.).

*Information demand* is about the researcher’s responsibility to advise the informant that the participation in this interview is voluntary and that he or she has the right to interrupt the interview and leave whenever he or she wants to. This was done before the interviews started. *Consent* means that the researcher has to have the interviewee’s consent to participate, and if the person is under 15 years old, a legal guardian has to give his or her consent. None of the informants were under the age of 15, and everyone gave me their consent. *Confidentiality* means that the informants are not supposed to be able to be recognised in the essay. In my results and discussion I have protected my informants’ identity by using aliases. Finally, *usage* means that the collected material is only supposed to be used in this particular research and nowhere else. This has also been followed. These research criteria were also used with the teacher.

### 3.3 Limitations of the method

Both the teacher and the students are people I have been in contact with before. I am aware of the fact that my relation to the interviewees can affect the way I ask the questions and also the way that I interpret the answers. I have of course tried to be as objective as possible. Another problem which affects the reliability of my results is the fact that I have conducted the interviews in Swedish, transcribed the recordings and then translated them into English. There is a risk that my translations have affected the meaning of what the interviewees have said. Säljö (1997) claims that this is a potential problem since an interview is a new situation and new information is co-created by the interviewer and the interviewee together. This co-creation will always be one step further away from the actual experiences, since this is only an account of experiences. Moreover, transcribing interviews will move them another step further away, and if the
transcriptions are then translated, this will move them another step away from the actual situation of interest.

3.4 Material

The interviewees for this study consisted of eight students and one teacher at an upper secondary school which is located in Southern Sweden. The students go to the same school, but in two different English classes. One class was an English 6 class were all students studied the natural science program. The other class was an English 7 CAE class where the students studied different academic programs since they had all chosen this course by themselves. There are three English courses at the upper secondary school, and these are English 5, 6 and 7. Additionally, CAE is a course which is at a somewhat higher level than the ordinary English 7 course, with the opportunity of taking the Cambridge Certificate in Advanced English. This course is however not given at all upper secondary schools. English 5 and 6 are mandatory for all academic programs, and English 7 and 7 CAE are extra courses that the students choose by themselves. In the vocational programs, only English 5 is mandatory.

The teacher interviewed in this study teaches both of the classes and she has been a teacher for 32 years. This particular teacher was chosen since I wanted the perspective on these classes from the teacher as well. The reason for using the English 6 class where the communication did not work that well, and the English 7 CAE class where the communication worked well was because I wanted to get the perspective from these opposite classes and compare their answers. The reason for using students who like to speak English, and students who do not like to speak English that much was to get the perspective from students with high and low WTC in these different classes and compare their answers. The teacher helped me to select these students.

3.5 Limitations and problems

One limitation is first of all the amount of data that has been collected, which is nine informants in total, and secondly the fact that I have only interviewed students who have the same English teacher and only interviewed this single teacher. The amount of data is too small to make any generalisations about the population, which affects the external validity of the research. The fact that I have only used one teacher and her students adds to the problem of not being able to make any generalisations about the population. Due to restrictions in time and written space, it was not possible to
interview students at different schools and in different classes, or even classes with different teachers within the same school.

4 Results

This section will present the results from one teacher interview and eight student interviews. The student interviews will be presented first and then the teacher interview. The interviews will be presented by the use of seven main questions for the students and five main questions for the teacher. Note that all quotes are translations from Swedish to English.

4.1 Student interview responses

4.1.1 How do the students come into contact with English outside school?

The most common ways of coming into contact with English outside school are by listening to music, watching series and movies, being active on social media, and reading books. Six students do not practice speaking English outside school. The only time they speak is when they go abroad. Two students speak English outside school on either a daily or weekly basis by Skyping with relatives who live abroad and have English as their mother tongue, and by speaking English to people all over the world through online video games.

4.1.2 How good do the students believe they are at speaking English and how important do they think it is to be good at it?

Two of the students in English 6 believe they are not so good at speaking English and they do not like to speak because they feel insecure and nervous about it. The other two students in the same class believe they are good at speaking and they enjoy it and are never nervous about it. Two students in English 7 CAE believe they are better than the average student at speaking English, while the other two students believe they are like an average student at this level. These students all like to speak and have never been nervous about it. All students in both courses believe it is important to have good oral skills, since it makes it easier to study and work abroad in the future and also to make new connections with people all over the world.
4.1.3 How much English do the students feel that they speak with each other during the lessons and is the amount of spoken English enough?

The common opinion among the students in English 6 is that they speak too little English during the lessons. On a scale from 1-7, they feel that they speak English at level 1-3. They speak English when it is a structured speaking activity, and then Swedish when it is not required of them to speak in English in order to solve an assignment. However, they believe they ought to try to speak English also between these structured activities because they feel that they need to practice natural conversations, since that is what they will be asked to do on the speaking part on the national tests.

I would like the entire lesson to be in English. We need to practice more natural conversations, and not just prepared speeches. I believe it is natural and relaxed conversation that is the most developing. […] We should not only speak English when we present in groups, we should speak English while we are preparing it also.

(Student F, English 6)

All students in English 7 CAE believe that they speak English as much as they should and want to. On a scale from 1-7, the students believe that they are at level 6-7 every lesson. They speak English with each other both during structured speaking activities and between these activities. Moreover, English 7 CAE is the course where they have spoken most English and they all agree that it is easier to speak English when everyone can and wants to speak English. When they compare their current amount of spoken English to English 5 and 6, they think it used to be at level 1-4, depending on which class they belonged to. They all think that that amount was too small and that they should have been able to speak more English at this level in school.

In English 5 and 6, I spoke Swedish when my classmates started to speak Swedish. It wasn’t like I continued in English if someone showed me that they did not want to speak in English any more. Now, I speak English almost the entire lesson because my classmates speak English with me all the time and I usually continue speaking English if someone would slip into Swedish because I know that everyone can speak here.

(Student E, English 7 CAE)
4.1.4 What factors contribute to the students’ WTC in English with their classmates?

According to the students there are five important factors that contribute to WTC in English; *the speaking activities themselves, group size, their own personality, the teacher* and *classmates*. Regarding *speaking activities*, the students in English 6 do not have the opportunity to speak that much during the lessons. They all agree that they mostly do exercises where they are supposed to write, read and learn new words. They sometimes do organised speaking activities which they try to do in English, but when those activities are over, they tend to switch to Swedish. The students believe they would speak more if they had more activities which required them to speak in English. The English 7 CAE students believe that they have many opportunities to speak during the lessons and that they also make use of the time they have speaking in class. They also think that English 5 and 6 did not consist of many speaking activities and that the focus was more on reading and writing, which led to less spoken English. Furthermore, *group size* is also an important factor. The two students who do not like to speak English feel that they speak more in small groups or pairs, because there is more time for them to speak and they feel like they have to speak more.

I speak more when we talk in small groups or pairs. There is more time for me to speak when I talk to fewer people. I am forced to speak more when I cannot wait for everyone else to do the speaking.

(Student A, English 6)

The other students who like speaking do not mind speaking in big groups depending on who the participants are. However, they do believe it is good to speak in small groups because each student can then get more time to speak. Another important factor is *the students’ own personality*. Those students who do not like to speak think that their willingness also depends on them being shy as a person, and their lack of confidence in speaking English. Those students who like speaking believe that their willingness also has to do with the fact that they are not shy people, and that they have always liked to speak English. Moreover, two students think that *the teacher* can make a great difference to the amount of spoken English between the students. They believe that more students would speak if there were clearer rules about the usage of English, and the consequences if students do not use the English language.
I think the teacher should have more control and tell us that we have to speak English. Don’t say that you would like us to speak English, say that we have to speak English instead.

(Student F, English 6)

An English 6 student who does not like to speak, also believes that the teacher can make her more willing to speak if the teacher does not interrupt her while she is speaking, because interruption makes her feel even more insecure about her speaking ability. She wants to get feedback after she is finished. Furthermore, the students believe that their classmates are one of the most important factors for their WTC in English. They believe that the combination of their classmates’ overall proficiency, personality, attitude, focus, WTC in English, and also the relationship they have with them is what affects them the most. These aspects will be presented in the next section.

4.1.5 How do classmates influence the students’ willingness to speak English?

All students from both classes think that overall proficiency of other classmates is important and their willingness to interact with other students increases when they are among students who are at their level or slightly above them.

I believe that the overall proficiency of my classmates are important. It’s better when everyone is at the same level because then everyone can get the right challenge.

(Student C, English 7 CAE)

Furthermore, the personality of the classmates is also vital, and this can sometimes be more important than the overall proficiency of the person. The two English 6 students who do not like to speak think it can be alright speaking to someone who is better than them if that person shares the communication space.

It depends on how the strong students are as persons. If they try to include other people in the discussion, it’s easier to speak, but if the strong students take over the discussion it’s harder to speak.

(Student A, English 6)

The other students in English 6 and 7 CAE also believe that the classmates’ personality is important. They think it can be alright speaking to someone who is slightly below them, if that person tries to speak, and has the ambition to be a part of the conversation.
I have no problems speaking with someone who is below my level, as long as the person tries to speak. It’s not fun speaking to someone who is not so good and who does not want to speak.

(Student G, English 6)

The attitude of other classmates is also a central factor that decides how much English that is spoken during the lessons. One student in English 6 who likes to speak English said:

It sometimes feels like the students’ attitude in the classroom is that we should speak Swedish, and I can therefore get a weird feeling when I’m trying to speak English. I would like the teacher to tell everyone to speak more English, because I don’t want to tell my classmates to do it.

(Student F, English 6)

Focus from other classmates is another essential factor. The students in English 7 CAE think there is a big difference in focus between their current and previous classmates in English. They believe that everyone in English 7 CAE is focused because they want to be there, while their previous classmates did not really want to be there which resulted in less English during the lessons. All students also believe that other students’ WTC in English is a very important aspect that affects their own willingness to speak. Two of the students believe it is the most important factor of them all.

I would say that what affects my willingness to speak the most is the other person’s willingness to speak English and to take part in a discussion. It isn’t fun speaking if the others are not engaged.

(Student D, English 7 CAE)

The two students in English 6 who do not like to speak English also think that WTC is the most important factor to get the conversations going.

It will be even harder for me to speak if the person I’m speaking with does not want to speak in English either. I think I will speak more if the other one also tries to contribute to the discussion.

(Student B, English 6)

Finally, the relationship to the students they are speaking with is important. The two students in English 6 who do not like to speak think it is easier to speak to someone they know, since these people do not care about how good they are at speaking.
It’s more comfortable speaking with someone I know well because they don’t care if I am bad at speaking. It’s harder to speak with someone I don’t know that well and who is really good and who notices immediately when I say something that is grammatically wrong.

(Student B, English 6)

4.1.6 What kind of peer do the students prefer and what kind of peer do they not prefer speaking with during lessons?

A shared opinion among the students is that they want to speak with classmates who are at their level or slightly above. They should also be willing to speak English and to take part in a conversation. Preferred classmates are those who share the communication space with others and who listen to what others have to say. Furthermore, the conversational partner should take the lesson with its activities seriously and be focused. The students also prefer speaking English to someone they know and feel comfortable with. Classmates who are not appreciated as conversation partners are people the students do not feel comfortable speaking with. These are also students who are considerably above or below them in overall proficiency. The better students take up all the conversation space and do not listen to what others have to say. On the other hand, the less skilled students do not have the ambition to become better at English, are not willing to speak and do not contribute to conversations.

A typical student that you can speak a lot of English with is a high performing student with high ambitions and who is at my level so I don’t have to lower the level of my English. A typical student I don’t want to speak with is a person who disturbs, who sits at the back of the classroom and who does not want to speak or pay attention. Most of the students in my English 5 and 6 class were like this last person I described. I often had to lower my level of English or speak Swedish with these students.

(Student E, English 7 CAE)

I want to speak to someone who is relaxed when they speak. They don’t have to be very good, but they have to want to speak English. That is the most important thing, because if they start speaking Swedish, there will only be barriers which makes it hard to start a conversation. Having someone who does not want to speak English is like putting someone who does not want to play football on a football field. It will not work.

(Student F, English 6)
I want to speak to a person who can speak English, who takes it seriously, who speaks English when we are supposed to speak English, and who listens to what I have to say.

(Student G, English 6)

However, the students in English 6 want the teacher to decide who speaks to whom, because the teacher can match students with each other so everyone gets a challenge. They believe it is tempting to choose friends over challenge if they are supposed to choose conversation partners by themselves, and that tends to result in more Swedish than English being spoken. The English 7 CAE students feel that it does not matter if they or the teacher choose because they can speak to anyone in their current class, but in English 5 and 6, they would sometimes have wanted to choose classmates by themselves so they would have had the opportunity to speak with someone at their level instead of having the teacher sometimes matching less skilled students and strong students together.

I don’t think it is right when a strong student has to be with a less skilled student and only the less skilled student benefits from it while the strong student gets pulled down. Of course you should speak with everyone, but it’s not developing to always speak with someone at a lower level than yourself.

(Student H, English 7 CAE)

4.1.7 How do the students feel about ability grouping in the English subject?

None of the interviewed students were against ability grouping in the English subject. However, the students in English 6 who do not like to speak do not want to be mixed with students from other English classes. They want the teacher to perform some sort of ability grouping within the class instead, because they feel comfortable with their class and are afraid that they would become quieter in a new group with new students. They think that some sort of ability grouping within their class could be positive for their WTC, but they are not certain if it would affect their oral production skills development.

I’m not sure if ability grouping would change my overall proficiency, but it would make me more comfortable speaking because I don’t feel like they are judging me if they are at my level. No one cares if I’m weak if they are also weak.

(Student A, English 6)
On the other hand, they also believe that they would feel a bit bad about themselves if they were to belong to a group who everyone saw as the weak group. In contrast, those students in English 6 who like to speak English have a positive attitude to ability grouping both across and within classes and believe that the strong students also need to be prioritised.

The less skilled students benefit more from being with strong students since the strong ones can help the less skilled ones. The strong ones will not get that much in return though.

(Student G, English 6)

They believe that it would help their oral production skills development if they were among other students who are as good as they are, who like English as much as they do, and who want to speak English during the entire lesson.

I think, or I know that I would develop my oral skills more if I were among students at my own level, and not only my oral skills but all of my skills. If I speak to someone who is at my level, I can speak faster and use more advanced vocabulary compared to if I speak to someone who is not so good.

(Student F, English 6)

All students in English 7 CAE are in favour of ability grouping and they would all have wanted their classmates in English 5 and 6 to be like the ones they have now in English 7 CAE, who want to speak English, who want to become better at it, and who are at the same level as them. They all believe that they would have developed their oral skills more in their previous courses if they had had the chance to speak as much English as they do now.

Those students in English 5 and 6 who thought English was difficult developed more compared to us students who thought English was easy. It can be frustrating to be a strong student in a class like this. I think I could have developed more if the class had been like my English 7 class.

(Student C, English 7 CAE)

It would have been good if there had been special groups for English 5 and 6. […] If some students are better than others in a subject, I don’t see the problem with placing them in a group together and the rest in another group. […] Those who have a talent for language have to be
able to express themselves without being afraid of insulting someone who is less talented or being afraid that others will not understand.

(Student E, English 7 CAE)

These students together with those who like speaking in the English 6 class also think that those students who are not so good at English could feel pointed out as weak if they were placed in a weak group, but at the same time they believe that ability grouping could benefit all students, regardless of ability level. All students do however point out the importance of having some sort of mix of levels in these ability groups. They think that all students develop their oral skills more if they get to interact with people who are more skilled than themselves, but the gaps between the levels should not be too big.

You sometimes need people who are at different levels. Someone who is better can be an incentive to become better, but it should not be a person who is miles above you.

(Student G, English 6)

4.2 Teacher interview responses

4.2.1 Is the amount of oral production between the students enough during the lessons?

The teacher does not think that the students speak enough English with each other during the lessons. There is however according to her a difference between her English 5, 6 and 7 classes. The students in her English 7 CAE class speak a lot of English during the entire lesson, without her having to remind them about using the target language all the time. The English 5 and 6 students on the other hand have a tendency to speak less English and more Swedish when they are supposed to speak with each other. English is here mostly used during structured speaking activities, while more Swedish is used between these activities. She believes that this difference has to do with the English 7 CAE class being more homogeneous since it consists almost entirely of motivated and willing students at the same ability level, whereas the English 5 and 6 classes are more heterogeneous with different ability levels, motivation and WTC in English. The teacher thinks it is hard to get several of her students to speak English, and that it gets tiresome always having to repeat herself saying ‘English please’. She also feels that she cannot push everyone to speak more English, since some students might become upset if she tells them to use the target language more in every lesson.
4.2.2 How important is it for the students’ oral production skills development to speak English during the lessons?

The teacher believes that it is important for students to use the target language during the lessons, but it is more important for some students and less important for some depending on their exposure to the language outside school. She moreover believes that it is a problem that some students are always silent or speak more Swedish than English, because the gap between the strong and less skilled students will only grow bigger.

It’s very important, but I have to say that those who speak the best have probably not learnt this in school. [...] It’s often the boys who get the best oral skills and that is because of their interactive computer games. [...] Several students learn half of the English they know outside school I believe. [...] It becomes most important for those students who do not come into contact with English outside school to speak English during the lessons, and these are the students who do not make use of the opportunity.

(Teacher interview)

4.2.3 What factors contribute to the students’ willingness to speak English with their classmates?

According to the teacher, there are several factors that can contribute to the students’ WTC in English with each other. One factor is how good the students themselves believe they are at speaking English. Another factor is how used they are to speaking English during the lessons from their classes in lower secondary school. A third factor can be the family and how much the students have been able to travel in English-speaking countries. The teacher believes that students will be more motivated to learn English if they have seen the benefits of having good oral skills and also seen that they are good at speaking. A fourth factor can be the organization of speaking activities. She believes that students will speak more if they know exactly what they are going to speak about. If they are more unclear about what they are going to say in English, it is easy to start speaking Swedish instead. Also the topic of discussion is important since she believes that the students will be more willing to speak in English if they are interested in what they are going to speak about. A fifth important factor is the personality of the students.

If you are a person who is quiet in Swedish, then perhaps you do not make that much noise in English either.

(Teacher interview)
The teacher believes that some students are silent in all subjects in school, and not only in the English subject. A sixth factor is the classroom environment. The teacher believes it is important to have an allowing classroom climate, where the students know that it is alright to make mistakes. Many students are afraid of saying the wrong thing in English, which results in them staying silent or speaking Swedish instead. Lastly, a factor which the teacher believes is the most important one is the classmates. She thinks that some of her students have the potential to perform even better, if they surround themselves with other classmates.

It makes a great change if the students surround themselves with motivated and driven students compared to less motivated and less driven students.

(Teacher interview)

4.2.4 How do classmates influence the students’ willingness to speak English with each other, and how does the teacher consider this factor in her teaching?

Classmates are extremely important for the students’ oral production skills development. In one of the teacher’s English 6 classes she says that:

There is one group that is very good, and pushes forward, and one group that is not as good, and I believe that this group could be inhibited by the strong students, because they believe that they are less skilled, and that they cannot express themselves in the same good way as the others can.

(Teacher interview)

The teacher furthermore says that:

My experience is that when strong and less skilled students speak with each other, the strong students tend to take over the discussion and the less skilled students do not get a chance to say much, but some strong students can also try to pull up the less skilled students and try to get them to participate in the discussion. This does depend though on the kind of student. Strong students can also be pulled down by less skilled students […].

(Teacher interview)

The teacher knows that she has got students with different WTC, and that these students can affect each other both in a negative and positive way. Depending on the lesson plan, the teacher sometimes tries to divide the students into pairs or groups consciously so that everyone gets to speak with someone who is approximately at the same ability level.
as them. She does this when they are going to have bigger discussions in groups, like book talks or argumentative discussions. She sometimes thinks it is good to have the same ability level in one group so all students feel like they get the chance to say something, and sometimes it is more beneficial if the ability levels are mixed so some stronger students can get the discussions going. During minor speaking activities, the teacher does not consciously divide the students into groups or pairs because that takes too much time to plan for every lesson. She does however have a certain placement of the students in the classroom which she changes during the semester to make sure that they get to speak with different students.

4.2.5 How does the teacher feel about ability grouping in the English subject to support oral production skills development?

The teacher thinks that if it was organizationally possible to have some sort of ability grouping, it would be desirable in some classes.

It would be desirable to have more homogeneous groups. […] Less skilled students who belong to a strong group might be inhibited in speaking compared to if they had been in a group with several students who are at their level.

(Teacher interview)

She believes it would be interesting if she could mix two of her English 6 classes with each other and put the somewhat stronger ones in one group and the less strong ones in one group, but she does not only want the top students in one class and the rest in one class.

I think that all groups need to have some students who can help to push the others who are not that strong. If there are too many less skilled students in one group, it can become negative for the group. I’m thinking about Krashen who talked about i+1 which means that you need to be surrounded by other people who are just above your own level.

(Teacher interview)

The teacher explains how the school she works in now tested dividing the students into three English groups based on the three grades G, VG and MVG which was the former grading system in Sweden. G was the lowest level and MVG was the highest level. This was done in order to see whether it would have any effects on the students’ development. The VG and MVG groups had worked very well while the G group had
not worked as well since it only consisted of less skilled and messy students that no
teacher wanted to teach. In this case, it was only the strong students who benefited from
ability grouping while the less skilled students did not benefit at all from it. There had
been a negative selection of students in this group. However, the teacher believes that
less skilled students can also benefit from ability grouping if the group consists of
students who are motivated and willing. In conclusion, the teacher believes that ability
grouping is preferable in some classes for oral production skills development, but it is
hard to accomplish in today’s Swedish school, since it is a very sensitive question.
Students might feel discriminated against and aggrieved if they feel that they belong to
the weak group. She also believes it is difficult to accomplish this organizationally.

5 Discussion

In this section of the essay, the results of this study will be discussed in relation to
previous studies. The discussion is divided into four sub-headings and the fourth sub-
heading will additionally contain a comprehensive discussion of the results.

5.1 The importance of speaking English during the lessons

The majority of the interviewed students do not speak English outside school, which
means that the only opportunity they get to speak is during their English lessons. All
students and the teacher agree that the amount of spoken English in the classroom is
important if the students do not have the opportunity of speaking outside school. At the
same time they all believe that the amount of spoken English is too small in the English
5 and 6 courses. The English 6 students experience that the emphasis is more on reading
and writing, and that they need to focus more on speaking activities in order to develop
their speaking skills more. Moreover, those students who do not like to speak English
believe that one reason for their less good speaking abilities and insecurity is that they
have not practiced speaking as much as they needed to. The shared opinion about the
importance of actually using the target language is backed up by Swain (2005:474ff.).
She argues that L2 acquisition takes place by using the language and that this provides
learners with opportunities to test what they can say and what they cannot say, and be
aware of their language gaps and how they can solve them. Therefore, the opinions of
the students and teacher do not seem to correspond with Krashen’s (1995:56f.) input
hypothesis which emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input in order to
acquire a new language rather than output.
The English 6 students wish that they could practice more natural conversations, because that is what they will be asked to do on the speaking part on the national tests. Additionally, the students want to be allowed to speak more freely about whatever they want instead of the teacher deciding the topics, and they do not want to be interrupted while they are speaking. This corresponds with the thinking in CLT. Here, Harmer (2007:69) claims that the aim of CLT is to involve students in more realistic conversations, where the goal of completing the task is just as important as the accuracy of their language use. Moreover, in order for an activity to be communicative, Harmer (2007:70) suggests that there should not be any material control among other criteria, and no teacher intervention.

5.2 Factors in the classroom that affect the willingness to speak English with classmates

The students and the teacher experience that there are five important factors that affect the students’ WTC. These are group size, personality of the students, speaking activities, the teacher, and classmates. These factors were also found by Cao and Philp (2006:487) who in their investigation conclude that factors that contribute to the students’ WTC, are among others group size, familiarity with interlocutors, the interlocutors participation and familiarity with topics under discussion. They also conclude that these factors show the dynamic nature of WTC in L2, which this study also confirms.

The English 6 students experience that their WTC varies between lessons depending on factors such as interlocutor, speaking activities, and group size. Additionally, the English 7 CAE students experience that their WTC has increased since they got to interact with other students in English 7 CAE who are at their level, who share their aims in the English subject, and who want to speak English. All students also believe that the reason why their WTC is low or high can depend on shyness or confidence in speaking English. The teacher also agrees since her experience is that some students are silent or chatty in all subjects in school, not only in the English subject. Furthermore, the teacher believes that students’ WTC is also affected by their previous English teaching at the lower secondary school, since some students have spoken a lot of English and some have spoken less. According to the teacher, this could affect the amount of spoken English at the upper secondary school.
These experiences and opinions from both the students and teacher seem to conform most to Kang’s (2005:279) *situational variables* which are factors such as interlocutor, topic under discussion, and conversational context. *The trait-like predisposition perspective* which McCroskey and Richmond (1990:21ff.) describe, which includes perceived communicative competence, communication anxiety, sex, age and attitudes towards the international community, does not seem to have an important impact on the students’ WTC according to themselves. It is only communication anxiety and previous English teaching which can be connected to this perspective. Lundahl (2012:210) argues that students are driven by different kinds of motivation due to different experiences from previous language teaching. Like the teacher, Lundahl believes this can affect the amount of spoken English in subsequent courses. Still, the results show that the situational variables seem to be the most important ones for the students’ WTC since they all point toward the situation or context that the students are a part of and not so much to their own personality.

The results of this study also indicate that the most important factor among the situational variables appears to be the interlocutor. All students regardless of WTC in English believe that their classmates’ overall proficiency, personality, attitude, focus, WTC in English, and also the relationship they have with each other is what affects their own willingness to speak English the most. Classmates as an important factor for the students’ WTC is also emphasized by Cao and Philp (2006), Eddy-U (2015), Miroslaw and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2015), and Yu (2015) in their investigations where they all found that classmates with their varying knowledge, participation, involvement, WTC, and personality are what affect the students the most.

5.3 How classmates influence the students’ willingness to speak English with each other

In order for the students to develop their oral skills as much as possible, both the students and teacher believe that a lot of opportunities to interact and communicate with others are important, but also that the interaction and communication needs to take place between the right students. Those students who do not like to speak English experience that their WTC get reduced when they have to interact with people who are much better than them. They claim that some students with high WTC tend to take up all of the communication space so there is no time for them to speak. Moreover, they also experience that when they are with students with high WTC, they tend to feel that they
do not have to speak because there are other students who can do all of the speaking. This was also found by Yu (2015:17) who concludes in her study that the low ability students did not increase their number of words or turn-taking when they interacted with students with high WTC. Her explanation of this was that students with high WTC intrude on the communication space of the students with low WTC which reduces their WTC even more. Similarly, Miroslaw and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2015:8) claim that there is a risk that students with high WTC will dominate the whole conversation and demotivate the other students. Yu (2015:17) also shows in her study that students with low WTC tend to rely on students with high WTC to do all of the speaking if it is possible.

The two students interviewed for this study who do not like speaking in class would also prefer interacting with people who are at their own level and who have approximately the same WTC as them, because then they would be forced to speak more. They believe that would be good since they do not take the initiative to speak themselves. Additionally, they think that they need to feel that they can be a part of the conversation, and feel that they can contribute without having to feel that other students are judging their speaking skills in order to want to speak more. Again, this is a conclusion found by Yu (2015:17) who claims that students with low WTC need to interact with each other in order to be more engaged in the conversation. Eddy-U (2015:52f.) also identified the importance of being able to participate in discussions among the L2 learners she interviewed for her study. Those students thought it was important for all group members to be able to participate and be involved in a speaking activity regardless of L2 ability.

The students in English 7 CAE are satisfied with their classmates they have now and feel that both their own and their classmates’ WTC is high. Their WTC was however lower in English 5 and 6 when they belonged to another class where the ability levels, aims, and ambition of their classmates were mixed. Additionally, those students in English 6 who like to speak English believe that their WTC could be higher if they were among students who were at their level, and who shared their aim and ambition in the English subject. They all experience that their WTC tends to be lower when they are among other students with low WTC and a lower ability level. This is also found by Eddy-U (2015:52f.) who argues that if students with high WTC are paired up with
students with low WTC, it can demotivate the strong students and thereby reduce their WTC.

Eddy-U’s (2015:52f.) conclusion, who found that students want to choose classmates on their own since they thought it would increase their WTC compared to being assigned to a group by the teacher, corresponds with how the English 7 CAE students felt about their two previous courses. They would have wanted to choose their conversation partners since they feel that they often got paired up with students with low WTC and low overall proficiency which was not developing for them. These students believe they would have chosen challenge before friends, because they knew that they were going to choose English 7 CAE as an extra course in their third year. Therefore, they needed to develop their oral skills as much as possible to be prepared. This conclusion does not however correspond with the opinions of the English 6 students, who want the teacher to decide who speaks to whom since they believe everyone will then get the right challenge they need. These students think it is tempting to choose friends before challenge if they are allowed to choose themselves. Cao and Philp (2006:487) came to the conclusion that students’ WTC increases if they get to speak with their friends, and this is somewhat true for all these students since they want to feel comfortable with their conversation partners. However, they all believe that challenge is more important than friends.

5.4 Ability grouping in the English subject

According to both the students and teacher, if some form of ability grouping was organizationally possible to perform either across classes or within one class, it would be preferable. Their shared opinion is that most students would develop their oral production skills more and be more comfortable speaking with other students if they were to belong to a group where everyone is at the same ability level and has the same ambition. Lundahl (2012:209) suggests that scaffolding is important for the learning process and that it can be collaborative between students since through interaction they can give each other the language support they need. The students and teacher in this study additionally believe that in order for the scaffolding to be rewarding for everyone, students need to collaborate more with students who are closer to their own ability level. They believe that a mixed ability classroom does not provide everyone with the right support. Students who like to speak English experience that those who do not like to speak gain the most from being in a mixed ability classroom, while they have to hold
back and even sometimes get pulled down by students who are at a lower level than themselves. Those students who do not like to speak experience that they get inhibited by students with high WTC since there is not enough space for them to speak, and they can sometimes feel that those who are better than them judge their speaking skills. Therefore, the results of this study show that strong and less strong students can both affect each other negatively. It is not only the strong students who feel negatively affected which is what Lavy et al (2012:28f.) conclude in their study.

Burke and Sass (2013:77f.) conclude that high ability students prefer being placed with other high ability students, middle ability students prefer being placed with high ability students, and low ability students prefer being placed with middle ability students. Similarly, in this study, those students who feel like they are not so good at speaking English and do not like it would prefer if they could be with those who are at their level or slightly above them. Moreover, those students who feel that they are good at speaking and who also enjoy it prefer being placed with other students who are also good and who have the same aim as them in English.

The students and teacher believe that students will develop their oral skills the most if they are among students who are at their own level or slightly above them. Both teacher and students think that ideally everyone should be surrounded by others who are somewhat better themselves because those who are at a higher level can work as an incentive for those who are at a lower level to become better. The distance between the individuals should however not be too big because that will not benefit anyone according to both the students and teacher. This line of reasoning is also in line with Vygotsky (1978) and his term ZPD where he claims that in order for a person to master something new, he or she needs the help from someone who has already mastered this skill, but the challenge should not be too big. Here, Burke and Sass (2013:77f.) claim that top students should not be paired up with low ability students, because the distance between these levels is too big for anyone to gain anything positive from it. This also conforms somewhat to what Slavin (cited in Engström, 1996:5f.) concludes in his research about the pros and cons of ability grouping. He states that one negative aspect is that low ability students will miss out on the opportunity to get stimuli and encouragement from high ability students if there are no such students in the group.

The students in English 7 CAE experience that their current English group which is more homogeneous compared to their previous English courses is where they have
spoken most English, and where they experience that they have developed their oral skills the most. They all wished that their English 5 and 6 classes could have been like their current class because they think that their oral skills and other skills would have been better now. The teacher also agrees with this claim and believes that the differences in the amount of spoken English between the courses have to do with the classes being more heterogeneous or more homogeneous in ability levels. This opinion, together with the other opinion that students develop their oral skills the most if they interact with students who are at a level slightly above them can be connected to Vardardottir’s (2013:120) results. Her conclusion is that increasing academic ability among classmates will also increase the individual student’s academic performance.

According to the students who do not like to speak, the positive aspect with ability grouping is that they would have to be more active if they could not depend on the better students to speak and lead the conversations. This is also the experience of the teacher, who claims that silent students tend to speak more if they have to speak in a group where they cannot hide. Moreover, the students who like speaking experience that they develop their oral skills more and are also more willing to speak if they are only among other proficient and motivated students. A negative aspect according to both the students and teacher is that students who are not so good at speaking English could feel a bit sad if they were placed in a group that everyone would see as the poor, weak group. These pros and cons of ability grouping mentioned by the students and teacher correspond with Slavin’s (cited in Engström, 1996:5f.) research findings. He claims that the positive aspect of ability grouping is that high ability students will keep up their motivation and will not get bored from having to wait for the low ability students, whilst the low ability students will become more active when they are no longer in the shadows of high ability students. Furthermore, one negative aspect could be that the low ability students might feel that they get marked as stupid.

In conclusion, according to this study, the students and teacher believe that the amount of spoken English in the classroom affects their oral production skills development. Moreover, there seems to be a difference between the mandatory courses 5 and 6 and the non-compulsory course 7 CAE regarding how many students feel that they develop their oral skills as much as possible. The issue appears to be how heterogeneous or homogeneous the classes are regarding ability levels and ambitions in the subject. The only time an English class becomes more homogeneous is when the students choose an
elective course (in this case English 7 CAE). All students on academic programs, regardless of ability level or ambition in the subject have to take the two first mandatory English courses. The question is why some students should have to either go through two English courses and feel bored due to the lack of challenge or feel insecure because the challenge is too high. The purpose of being in school for every individual should be to develop as much as possible, and it is the duty of the school to make sure that everyone gets that opportunity. If English teachers feel that their students inhibit each other’s oral production skills development due to the mix of ability levels, ambition and aim, schools need to start thinking about how this problem can be solved to help both the students and the teacher in the best way.

Schools should not be afraid of making students feel singled out when being placed in a specific group. If ability grouping actually could help those students who do not like to speak to feel more confident about it, whilst at the same time also helping those students who like to speak English and who have high aims to develop their English even more, then this seems like something that should be considered. Given the research suggesting that different kinds of students can either encourage or inhibit each other’s oral production skills development, the risk is that students might graduate without having been given the chance of reaching their full potential in the English subject. This should be an argument for considering some form of ability grouping, since poor oral skills could cause problems in the future for several people. We live in a world where good knowledge of English is becoming more important all the time.

Another argument for ability grouping is that all students believe that the most important thing is that they develop as much as possible in order to have the opportunity of succeeding with possible future studies or work-related assignments which require good oral skills in English. This view seems to outweigh the view about alienation and sadness of belonging to a certain English group among both students with high and low WTC. Additionally, the teacher believes that it is hard to challenge all students at all ability levels every lesson. This is a third argument for schools to start thinking about how ability grouping can be organizationally possible instead of expecting teachers to challenge every student in every lesson irrespective of the range of ability levels.

6 Conclusions

This investigation started off with the following research questions:
• In what ways do classmates influence each other’s WTC in English during the lessons according to the students and the teacher?

• What kind of classmate do the students claim they would want to interact with if they were free to choose and why?

• How do the students and the teacher feel about ability grouping in the English subject in order to support the students’ oral production skills development?

By using qualitative methods in the form of personal interviews with students from English 6 and 7 CAE, and their teacher, I can now attempt to answer these questions. According to both the teacher and students, the answer to the first question is that they believe that students influence each other’s WTC in English, and the ways in which they impact each other are complex. It appears that it is the particular mix of classmates’ overall proficiency, personality, attitude, focus, WTC in English, and also the relationship they have with each other that seems to decide how much English is spoken among the students in a class. When students with low and high WTC interact with each other, both kinds of student experience that their WTC sometimes diminishes. Students with low WTC think that students with high WTC judge their speaking skills negatively, they do not get enough space to speak, and they tend to rely on the other students to do all of the speaking. On the other hand, students with high WTC experience that they get pulled down by students with low WTC since they have to use a simpler language, and more often speak Swedish instead of English with them.

The answer to the second question is also complex. In line with earlier findings, the students in my study want to interact with others who are at their level or slightly above them, who they feel comfortable speaking with, who listen to them, who share the communication space, who are willing to speak English, who are focused, and who take the lessons seriously. If students do not get to interact with classmates who match them both in ability level, ambition and WTC, they believe that they will not develop their oral skills as much as they should be able to. A shared opinion among the students and teacher is that students do not develop to their full potential in the two mandatory courses English 5 and 6, where the ability levels, ambitions, and WTC of the students are more heterogeneous. It is only in English 7 when the classes become more homogeneous that these students experience that they develop their oral skills in an appropriate way.
The answer to the third question is therefore that both the students and the teacher believe that some form of ability grouping in all English courses could be a good solution to allow all students regardless of ability level to develop their oral production skills more. Those students who do not like to speak would prefer ability grouping within their own class while the rest of the students would not mind ability grouping across classes. The teacher would also prefer ability grouping across some of her classes. A shared opinion is that students need to interact with those who are at the same ability level or slightly above themselves in order to develop their speaking skills as much as possible.

For further studies, it would be interesting to expand on this investigation by interviewing more students and teachers at different schools, and also students and teachers who belong to the vocational programs since this study only was carried out on academic programs. Furthermore, research could continue by comparing interviews with observations in all three English courses in order to see how students actually behave orally with each other in the different courses. It is important for teachers and schools to know how students experience their effects on each other’s WTC. Only then can we propose changes so that all students can reach the aim in the subject, which is to have the ability, desire and confidence to use English in different situations and for different purposes.
References


Appendices
Appendix 1: Interview protocol to students

Warm up questions

- How do you come into contact with English on a day-to-day basis?
- How important do you think it is to learn to speak English well?
- How good do you think you are at speaking English?
- Do you speak English outside of school? If yes, when, with whom, how much?
- How do you feel about speaking English with your classmates in the classroom?

What factors in the classroom contribute to your willingness to speak English with your classmates during the lessons?

- Why do these factors affect you?
- Are any factors more important than other factors? If yes, which ones? Why?
- During what kind of activities do you only or mostly speak English with your classmates? Why?

What factors in the classroom can make you unwilling to speak English with your classmates during the lessons?

- Why do these factors affect you?
- What can be the reasons for speaking Swedish instead of English during the lessons with your classmates?
- During what kind of activities do you speak only or mostly Swedish with your classmates? Why?
- What has to change in the classroom, in order for you to want to speak more English with your classmates?

Do your classmates influence your willingness to speak English during the lessons?

- If yes, how do your classmates influence your willingness to speak English?
- How much English do you feel that you speak with your classmates during the lessons? (On a scale from 1-7?) Is it enough according to you? Why, why not?
- How much English do you want to speak with your classmates during the lessons?
- How important is it to choose classmates by yourself that you want to speak with?
- What kind of classmate do you prefer and what kind of classmate do you not prefer speaking with? Why?
- **For English 7:** Is there a difference between English 5, 6 and 7 regarding the amount of spoken English between you and your classmates? If yes, why is that you think? How has it affected your oral production skills?
How do you feel about ability grouping in the English subject?

- Does the ability level of your classmates influence your willingness to communicate in English? If yes, how does it influence you?
- What would be good and less good about ability grouping in the English subject?
- Would it be a good idea if the teacher would pair you up with specific students on purpose in order to create some sort of ability grouping? Why, why not?
- Could ability grouping help you to develop your oral production skills more compared to a mixed ability group do you think? Why, why not?
Appendix 2: Interview protocol to teacher

Warm up questions

- How much English do you expect or do you want your students to speak with each other during the lessons? Is there a difference between the English 6 and 7 classes?
- How difficult is it to get students to speak English with each other?

What factors contribute to the students’ willingness to speak English with each other during the lessons?

- Why do these factors affect the students do you think?
- How do you think about these factors when you plan your lessons?
- How important is it for the students’ oral production skills development to speak English with each other during the lessons? How important is interaction?
- How are your English 6 and 7 classes different in terms of willingness to speak English with each other? Why is that you think?

What factors make students unwilling to speak English with each other during the lessons?

- Why do these factors affect the students do you think?
- How do you think about these factors when you plan your lessons?
- When can it be beneficial for the students to speak Swedish instead of English?
- How are your English 6 and 7 classes different in terms of being unwilling to speak English with each other? Why is that you think?

How do classmates affect each other’s willingness to speak English?

- How big is the influence from classmates compared to the other factors?
- How often is this influence from other classmates positive and how often is it negative? Is there a difference between the English 6 and 7 classes?
- How often do the students get to decide who they want to work and speak with during the lesson, and how often do you decide that? Why?
- Do all students get to speak as much English as they want to and need to with their classmates during the lessons? If no, what are the consequences of it?
- How much does it affect the oral production skills development do you think?

How do you feel about ability grouping in the English subject?

- How much does the ability level of classmates affect the students’ oral production skills development do you think? Why?
- What would be good and less good about ability grouping in the English subject?
- How can ability grouping help the students’ willingness to speak English?
• Do you use any kind of ability grouping in your English teaching to support the oral production skills? If yes, what do you do?
• Would it be a good idea if you paired up specific students with each other on purpose in order to create some sort of ability grouping? Why, why not?

Can ability grouping help the students to develop their oral production skills more compared to a mixed ability group do you think? Why, why not?
Appendix 3: Ethical agreement

Background

My name is Jennifer Svensson and I am studying to become a Swedish and English teacher at upper secondary school. I am right now writing my C-essay in the English subject and I am interested in investigating how peers affect each other regarding their willingness to speak English, how this affects the development of students’ oral production skills, and furthermore whether some sort of ability grouping could be an alternative to support the students’ oral production skills development. To gather material for this essay, I will conduct interviews with students and one teacher.

Agreement

I consent to participation in this study. I understand that participation in these interviews is voluntary and I have the right to interrupt the interview and leave whenever I wish, in which case all material will be deleted and not used in the study. I consent to the interview being recorded. When the essay is finished, all recorded interviews will be deleted. My identity will not be revealed in the essay. It is only the author of this essay who will listen to these interviews and the material will only be used for research purposes. Depending on the results, there is a possibility that the anonymous transcripts of this interview may be shared with other researchers. When it is finished the essay will be published electronically in DIVA, and I will be able to read a copy. I understand that I may be contacted after the interviews are finished if there is need to complement the interview, or if there is something that is unclear with what was said during the interview. I may withdraw my participation at any time by contacting the interviewer using the information below.

I accept these terms and I want to participate in this investigation

Name and date

If you have any questions regarding this study, feel free to contact me whenever you want to.

Mail: XXX
Mobile: XXX
Appendix 4: List of interviews


