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Bachelor's thesis

# Summative assessment of oral language proficiency

*Four Swedish EFL teachers' views on communicative competence, grading criteria and strategy use*



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## Abstract

Assessment is one of the major struggles for EFL teachers, not least oral proficiency assessment. Considering the great influence of communicative competence on today's EFL classroom, oral language proficiency is a common source of assessment. However, it is also difficult to assess, and grading criteria are not always easy to interpret. This study investigates EFL teachers' views on oral proficiency assessment, focusing on communicative competence, fluency, grading criteria and strategy use. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers in Swedish upper secondary school, and the data were analysed by means of grounded theory, an inductive approach aiming to develop theories on the basis of empirical findings and emphasising links between theoretical explanations and practical situations. The results suggest that oral language proficiency is valued highly by teachers although being difficult to assess, not least for practical reasons. Furthermore, oral language proficiency is defined as interaction rather than production, and basic theories of communicative competence (*threshold levels*) and fluency are emphasised by the teachers. The results also confirm the notion that grading criteria are interpreted differently by different teachers. Lastly, the findings indicate the importance of students' strategy use in teachers' assessment of oral language proficiency, as well as the difficulty of assessing this, not least when a student is highly proficient and does not demonstrate the need to use strategies to solve problems in interaction. Some implications of the study are the importance of providing teachers with clear guidelines on how to interpret grading criteria, as well as teachers engaging in collegial collaboration when assessing oral language proficiency.

## Key words

oral fluency, oral interaction, knowledge requirements, grading, threshold levels, interviews, grounded theory, Swedish upper secondary school, syllabus for English



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## 1 Introduction

Oral communication is the most common source for assessment in Swedish schools, and a majority of teachers prioritise this type of assessment and consider it important in relation to grading (Apelgren & Oscarsson 2011:11). At the same time, however, many teachers report on oral communication being difficult to assess (Apelgren & Oscarsson 2011:12). In fact, Alderson and Bachman (in Louma 2004:ix) suggest that "speaking is [...] the most difficult language skill to assess reliably".

Moreover, the knowledge requirements regarding oral proficiency in the syllabus for English in Swedish upper secondary school (Skolverket<sup>1</sup> 2011a) are not always easy to interpret, perhaps especially when it comes to formulations such as "to some extent" or "relatively structured". In addition, the knowledge requirements emphasise students' use of strategies in oral communication, specifically strategies to solve problems and improve interaction. These can certainly prove difficult to assess, not least considering the fact that many strategies are not explicitly demonstrated but take place in the students' minds and preparations. Additionally, problems may not occur, in which case the students do not have the chance to demonstrate their ability to apply strategies. There seems to be no consensus regarding how strategies should be assessed more specifically.

These facts combined highlight the importance of investigating how the assessment of students' oral language proficiency is indeed conducted in Swedish schools today, as well as formulating guidelines regarding the interpretation of the knowledge requirements to ensure just assessment and grading of students' performance. This area is certainly not unexplored; many studies, qualitative and quantitative, have been conducted on oral proficiency

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<sup>1</sup> The Swedish National Agency for Education, referred to as Skolverket in this paper.



assessment (see e.g. Canale & Swain (1980), Louma (2004), and Sandlund & Sundqvist (2016)). This study aims to shed further light on this complex matter, thereby also hopefully providing me with a solid foundation on which to base my assessment of students' oral proficiency as a future teacher. The study strives to present valuable contributions to already existing research, but also add new insights by focusing on an area which has been less extensively explored, namely the assessment of strategy use. In addition, many previous studies focus on formative assessment (assessment for learning), while this investigation is primarily concerned with summative assessment (assessment primarily related to grading) (Jönsson 2013).

## 1.1 Aim and research questions

This study investigates Swedish upper secondary school teachers' views on oral proficiency assessment in the EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom, focusing on summative assessment, and teachers' views on and interpretations of grading criteria. One primary area of focus is the assessment of strategies in relation to the formulations regarding these in the knowledge requirements for oral proficiency. More specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What views do EFL teachers in Swedish upper secondary school have on summative assessment of oral language proficiency and how do they work with this?
- What are the teachers' views on, and how do they interpret, the knowledge requirements regarding oral language proficiency?
- What are the teachers' views on the role of strategies in oral language proficiency and on how these should be assessed summatively?



## 2 Theoretical background

Apelgren & Oscarson's (2011:11) study of assessment in the language classroom suggests that "Classroom observation of oral communication' is by far the most common assessment activity". This is perhaps not very surprising, considering the fact that oral communication takes place in most language lessons. The same study also shows that teachers consider the assessment of oral communication high priority and 80 percent of those included consider it important in relation to grading. At the same time, 50 percent of the teachers reported on oral communication being hard to assess (Apelgren & Oscarsson 2011:12). Moreover, Sandlund and Sundqvist's (2016) study suggests that raters' assessment of oral proficiency tends to be highly divergent. Compared to assessing other language abilities, there are many factors influencing how we assess how well someone speaks a language, not necessarily directly related to actual language ability (Louma 2004:1), including gender, status, personal characteristics and the nature of interaction (Alderson & Bachman in Louma 2004:x).

The following sections present central concepts used in the study and outline how it relates to the syllabus for English in upper secondary school.

### 2.1 The assessment of oral proficiency and the syllabus

The syllabus for English in Swedish upper secondary school (Skolverket 2011a) combines oral and written proficiency in *Production and interaction*, and three of the five core points relate more or less explicitly to oral proficiency: students should have the opportunity to develop "the ability to express [themselves] and communicate in English in speech and writing", "the ability to use different language strategies in different contexts", and "the ability to adapt language to different purposes, recipients and situations" (Skolverket 2011a). The knowledge requirements for the grade of E (the



lowest passing grade) in the compulsory course English 5 include the following paragraphs relating to oral language proficiency:

In oral and written communications of various genres, students can express themselves in **relatively** varied ways, **relatively** clearly and **relatively** coherently. Students can express themselves with **some** fluency and **to some extent adapted** to purpose, recipient and situation. [...]

In oral and written interaction in various, and more formal contexts, students can express themselves clearly and with **some** fluency and **some** adaptation to purpose, recipient and situation. In addition, students can choose and use **essentially** functional strategies which **to some extent** solve problems and improve their interaction.

Students discuss **in basic terms** some features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used, and can also make **simple** comparisons with their own experiences and knowledge. (Skolverket 2011a, emphasis in original)

The first two paragraphs concern language and fluency, while the third one deals with language content. The words in bold are evaluative words specific for the assessment grade at hand, and these are what distinguish the different grades. For example, for the grade of A, the student must be able to use not only “essentially functional strategies”, but “well functioning strategies” (Skolverket 2011a). Moreover, the extract demonstrates the emphasis in the syllabus of students’ use of strategies, an aspect developed further in section 2.4 below.

The Swedish grading system has five levels for a passing grade, with criteria specified for three of them, A, C and E. There are advantages and disadvantages of having many levels, the main advantage perhaps being that feedback can be specific and progression clear (Louma 2004:80). However, the more levels there are, the harder it is for the teacher to distinguish between



them. Louma (2004:81) also states that grading scales need to be concrete, brief and practical, and not include evaluative words such as *poor* or *excellent*. Only concrete descriptions or examples can be helpful in keeping the levels apart consistently (Louma 2004:82). An example of an unsuccessful criterion, according to Louma (2004:82), is “Can use a range of appropriate strategies”, since this does not specify exactly what *strategies* are, and both *a range of* and *appropriate* are subject to interpretation by each individual assessor. Other such qualifiers include *a few*, *many*, *most*, *limited*, *moderate* and *good* (Louma 2004:82). It is not uncommon that assessment criteria are vaguely phrased, with the inevitable consequence that teachers interpret them differently (Sandlund & Sundqvist 2016:129).

## 2.2 Communicative competence

The concept of *communicative competence* is central in today’s foreign language learning and assessment. It was coined by the sociolinguist D.H. Hymes in the 1970s and has been elaborated by many others since then, among them Canale and Swain (1980). Hymes (1971:56) was critical of the tendency of the linguistic theory of the time (not least that of Chomsky) to focus entirely on system and structure and disregard actual language use and its “ineradicable social component”. The communicative approach which has been developed on the basis of Hymes stresses users and their use of language to communicate. In the foreign-language classroom, it has led to extensive use of communication exercises as well as authentic learning material (Louma 2004:97).

Canale and Swain developed the concept of communicative competence and applied it in the context of school and second- or foreign-language learning. Canale and Swain (1980:28) define communicative competence as comprising three main competencies: *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic* and *strategic competence*. Grammatical competence includes lexical knowledge and





knowledge of rules of morphology, syntax, semantics and phonology, while sociolinguistic competence comprises sociocultural rules of use and discourse (ibid:29, 30). Lastly, strategic competence is concerned with communication strategies necessary to compensate for lack of grammatical or sociolinguistic competence (Canale and Swain 1980:30).

In their outline of different theories of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980:9) suggest the most basic types, *threshold levels* (see e.g. Van Ek 1986), to be concerned with “the minimum level of (mainly oral) communication skills needed” to manage common second- or foreign-language situations. In other words, this definition of communicative competence focuses on the ability to get one’s meaning across (Savignon 1972) and to make oneself understood, e.g. in contacts with speakers of the language in everyday situations.

In addition to the competencies identified by Canale and Swain, Van Ek (1986) includes *social competence*, referring to individuals’ willingness and motivation to use language. This competence is also stressed in the syllabus: “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” (Skolverket 2011a, my emphasis).

The syllabus for English in Swedish upper secondary school is strongly influenced by the concept of communicative competence, not least illustrated by the following quote: “Students should be given the opportunity, through the use of language in functional and meaningful contexts, to develop all-round communicative skills” (Skolverket 2011a). The background of this is the strong influence on the syllabus of the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)* (Council of Europe: n.d.), in turn largely inspired by the concept of communicative competence (Lundahl 2009:102). One of the foundations in the view of the CEFR on communicative competence is strategies, an aspect elaborated in section 2.4.



## 2.3 Oral fluency

As illustrated above, the knowledge requirements specify that students must express themselves with (some) fluency (Skolverket 2011a). Fluency is a “thorny issue in assessing speaking” (Louma 2004:88), perhaps primarily due to the fact that the meaning of the word fluency is not perfectly clear-cut, ranging from general to narrow, technical and linguistic interpretations. For example, fluency may concern some kind of flow in language use – fluent speakers often speak more and faster and do not use disturbing hesitation markers (Louma 2004:88).

In terms of foreign-language learning, pronunciation is likely to be included in the assessment of fluency. Interestingly, although the syllabus emphasises fluency, it does not mention pronunciation. Louma (2004:10) notes that the sound of people’s speech is an important aspect of assessment, and that many people judge the status of a speaker as native or non-native on the basis of pronunciation. Whether or not native-like pronunciation should be the standard against which learner language is assessed can be discussed, however, since there are many native standards of English today and since research shows that very few learners actually achieve this (Louma 2004:10). Achieving native-like pronunciation could be contrasted to simply being able to make oneself understood, regardless of pronunciation (cf. *threshold levels* in 2.2 above). The term that Louma (2004:10) suggests be used as a standard for learner pronunciation, instead, is *communicative effectiveness*. This is based on comprehensibility and related to native speaker standards, but focuses on more realistic standards considering what can be expected from a foreign-language learner.

According to Skolverket (2011b) *fluency* in language production is concerned with a natural flow and the student being able to speak without interruptions or hesitations; oral production with fluency is easy to follow. As regards interaction, the avoidance of disruptions and hesitations is also mentioned, and



the student is expected to be able to follow, contribute to and develop communication (ibid.).

#### 2.4 The assessment of strategies in oral language production and interaction

As mentioned in 2.1 above, one of the knowledge requirements for English concerns students' use of strategies, specifically strategies aimed at solving problems or improving interaction. The central content regarding production and interaction in the syllabus also mentions strategies for “contributing to and actively participating in discussions” (Skolverket 2011a). Moreover, communicative strategies are not only emphasised in the policy documents, but also something which teachers tend to focus on in assessment (Sandlund & Sundqvist 2016:129). Börjesson (2012:1) explains that the reasons behind focusing on strategies in the syllabus include making students more active, efficient and independent language-learners. Several parts of the syllabus include references to strategies focusing on language learning, whereas this study focuses specifically on those relating to oral proficiency assessment.

The syllabus formulation regarding strategies used to solve problems and improve interaction is related to Canale and Swain's (1980:27, 30) discussion of strategic competence, which specifically stresses competence necessary to compensate for any breakdowns in one of the other competencies. They distinguish between two main types of such strategies: those relating primarily to grammatical competence (e.g. how someone paraphrases grammatical forms they do not know or remember), and those relating to sociolinguistic competence (e.g. how to address strangers whose social status is unknown) (Canale & Swain 1980:30–31). Furthermore, they stress that these strategies may be helpful particularly at early stages of second- or foreign-language learning, and that the need to use them is expected to decrease as learners grow older and more proficient (ibid:31).



Regarding strategies for contributing to and participating in discussions, Börjesson (2012:15–16) mentions examples such as how to keep a conversation going, e.g. gestures, tag questions and phrases used to change the subject. Louma (2004:18) specifies this further with so-called fixed phrases, fillers and hesitation markers to help the speaker keep the conversation going, keep the floor and give themselves time to formulate what they want to say. Examples include *ah*, *you see*, and *that's a good question* (Louma 2004:18). Although students should use strategies to contribute to and participate in communication, being too talkative or taking over is viewed negatively by many teachers (Sandlund & Sundqvist 2016:129). Another strategy which should be rewarded, however, according to Louma (2004:28), is when a speaker mirrors their conversation partner's phrases or builds on their earlier turns, thereby indicating that they master interactive skills.

Furthermore, to a certain degree students' use of strategies in oral interaction may be dependent on how they are paired. For example, being paired with someone more proficient or talkative may be a challenge, and this may add competitiveness over the floor (Sandlund & Sundqvist 2016:128). The responsibility for keeping the conversation going may also be an intricate aspect. In addition, paired interaction tests, especially in cases where the students are at different levels, may result in them being assessed against each other rather than the assessment criteria (Sandlund & Sundqvist 2016:128).

In the view of Börjesson (2012:18), an example of an unsuccessful strategy is when the student uses a word in their native language when they cannot think of the English word, instead of finding an appropriate synonym or other way to explain the missing word in English. Relatedly, Louma (2004:17) mentions the importance of vague words such as *thing* which help the speaker continue despite missing a particular word. These are a natural part of informal talk, and learners using them appropriately should be rewarded (Louma 2004:18). Other examples of insufficient strategic competence, however, are if the student



gives up when they cannot think of a word, or does not ask for a clarification if there is something they do not understand. Börjesson (2012:19) further stresses that teachers should try to understand how students think when they choose certain strategies or why they choose not to use strategies at all, which certainly does not make assessment any easier. This is also related to Bachman and Palmer's (1996) distinction between *language knowledge* and *strategic competence*, in which strategic competence focuses on internal interactions taking place when an individual is interacting with the setting. Relatedly, Tornberg (2009:56) distinguishes between *psycholinguistic* and *interactive approaches*, the former emphasising internal processes and viewing communication strategies as plans to solve problems and reach communicative goals. The language user may use these consciously, or be unaware of them taking place. The interactive approach, on the other hand, is concerned with communication strategies as mutual attempts by speakers to keep the conversation going.

As illustrated in this section, there are many aspects to consider in the assessment of strategies in oral language proficiency, not only those specifically relating to strategies used to improve interaction and solve problems.

### 3 Method and participants

The sections below include brief presentations of the participants in the present study as well as an account of the choice of methods. Lastly, ethical considerations and limitations of the study are accounted for.

#### 3.1 Participants

The data for this study were collected through interviews with four EFL teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools. Being small-scale and qualitative, the study applied collection methods ensuring the data fitted the



purpose of the study rather than being representative (Neuman 2014:273). Hence, a combination of *purposeful sampling* and *criterion sampling* was applied, the former being concerned with finding participants who can “provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation so as to maximize what we can learn” (Dörnyei 2007:126) and the latter focusing on selecting participants who meet certain criteria (ibid:128), in this case qualified teachers of English in Swedish upper secondary school. For practical reasons, a certain element of *convenience sampling* was also applied in that participants were simply chosen who met certain practical criteria, such as geographical proximity, availability and willingness to participate (Dörnyei 2007:99, 129).

One female and three male participants agreed to take part in the study, and they work at three different schools in the south of Sweden. Three of the participants were unknown to me and contacts were taken through e-mails to their respective school. One of the participants was an acquaintance whom I had met several times before. In hindsight, it would perhaps have been preferable to include only unfamiliar interviewees, as that could have guaranteed greater reliability and avoided the tendency of the interviewee to steer the interview away from the topic at hand towards related aspects known to be shared by the interviewee and myself. This would also have guaranteed equal interviewer objectivity to a larger extent. However, enough data were collected in all interviews despite this potential drawback.

In the transcriptions and henceforth in this paper, the participants are referred to by the pseudonyms Steven, Mark, Paul and Elizabeth, to guarantee their anonymity. Since all participants teach the course English 5, the interview questions, particularly those relating to knowledge criteria, focus on this course. Some of the interviewees teach only English 5 now, while others also teach other English courses as well as other subjects. All participants are licensed teachers of English for upper secondary school with Masters of Arts



in their educational backgrounds. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants and their experience.

**Table 1.** Participants.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of experience in upper secondary school (all forms of teaching)</b>	<b>Other teaching experience</b>	<b>Other subjects</b>
Steven	30–35	4	-	Geography (not taught now)
Mark	35–40	2½ (9)	Swedish for Immigrants, adult education, lower secondary school	Physical education (not taught now)
Paul	30–35	4 (7)	Lower secondary school	Swedish
Elizabeth	45–50	11 (20)	Adult education	Religion, Swedish Rhetoric and Communication

### 3.2 Interviews

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. This type of interview was chosen rather than structured interviews since they can “make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues” and allow the researcher to follow up on the topics and angles emphasised by the interviewee (Brinkmann 2013:21). Semi-structured interviews allow for some flexibility and for the interviewees to develop open-ended answers and ideas. However, the interviewer still has a list of themes and questions to be answered (Denscombe 2010:186). For this study, 27 questions were prepared in the following themes: *background*, *summative assessment of oral language proficiency*, *oral language proficiency in relation to the syllabus*, and



*assessment of strategies in oral production and interaction.* The complete interview guide is available in Appendix 1.

Three of the interviews were conducted at the respective teacher's school during or after their working day, and the fourth one was conducted at the public library, all being neutral locations where the interviewees could feel relaxed and there were no disturbances (Trost 2010:65). Each interview lasted 50–60 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Swedish since this is the participants' first language, in which they could express themselves most comfortably and clearly. Quotes included in the analysis have been translated into English, and the originals are available in Appendix 3.

### 3.3 Analysis of interviews

To enable analysis of data, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. With inspiration from Olsson (2018) the data were then coded and analysed by means of *grounded theory* (Denscombe 2010:106ff), an inductive approach emphasising links between theoretical explanations and practical situations. Instead of verifying theories, the grounded theory approach aims to arrive at a “theory suited to its supposed uses” (Glaser & Strauss (1967), quoted in Cho & Lee (2014:2). Reasons for choosing this particular approach include the fact that it allows the researcher to investigate phenomena from new perspectives and develop a holistic understanding (Cho & Lee 2014:16). Additionally, this method is particularly suitable for small-scale studies using qualitative data to conduct exploratory research focusing on a particular setting (Denscombe 2010:106). The approach sets out to develop theories on the basis of empirical findings (in this case interview data), i.e. the theories should be grounded in empirical research (Denscombe 2010:107).

Furthermore, grounded theory is based on a ‘constant comparative method’ in that concepts and theories are developed through the researcher persistently comparing ideas with existing data and improving the concepts and theories





which emerge by checking them against new data (Denscombe 2010:107). In the present study, however, no new data were added during the analysis process, but existing data were continuously re-evaluated. Moreover, using grounded theory, the researcher must approach the topic with an open mind and not be influenced by a predetermined set of ideas (Denscombe 2010:108). That is why, in this study, a number of open-ended questions were constructed in a semi-structured interview allowing the participants themselves to steer the focus of the interview to a certain extent.

Once all interviews had been transcribed, the first stage in the grounded theory approach is so-called *open coding* (Denscombe 2010:113), in which the data were coded so that all data which had something in common were categorised together. It could be that they refer to the same issue, use the same word or phrase in relation to a certain topic, or share statements concerning the same emotion. At this stage, the codes are descriptive and open to change and refinement (Denscombe 2010:113). Next, the codes were analysed on the basis of relationships between them (for example, those relating to communicative competence were categorised together), and certain codes were identified as more crucial than others. This stage is called *axial coding* (Denscombe 2010:113). Lastly, key components, such as *oral fluency*, were distinguished from less significant categories in the data, in the stage of *selective coding* (Denscombe 2010:113). Analysing the data by means of these stages of coding allowed me to arrive at concepts to help answer the research questions of the present study, and to explain the complex phenomenon of assessing oral language proficiency.

### 3.4 Ethical considerations

A crucial aspect when conducting interviews is to consider and respect ethical principles. In the design and implementation of this study, the Swedish Research Council's (2002) principles for research ethics were taken into



consideration. These include four main requirements: the requirements of *information, compliance, confidentiality* and *use*.

The information requirement entails that participants must be informed of their role in the project and the terms for their participation, e.g. that their participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. The requirement of compliance means that the researcher must have all participants' consent – they have the right to decide if, for how long and under what conditions they participate. The confidentiality requirement entails that all data collected about participants are handled confidentially and that any data that can lead to an individual being identified are kept safe and only available to the researcher. Lastly, the use requirement requires that all data collected about individuals be used for the specified research purposes only.

The participants in this study were informed about all of the above in written form before agreeing to participate in the study (see Appendix 2), and in verbal form before the interview. In the report, no personal details about the participants are included, and they are referred to only by their pseudonyms.

### 3.5 Limitations

Using interviews as a method has both advantages and disadvantages. Disadvantages include the fact that the data are based on what the interviewees say they do and think, which may not always be the actual truth, and that the interviewees may be affected by the interviewer as well as the context (Denscombe 2010:202–203). Reliability, in other words, is one of the main problems related to using this method (Troost 2010:134). However, these disadvantages were avoided to the greatest extent possible by conducting the interviews at neutral locations where the interviewees could feel comfortable and not be distracted (Troost 2010:65), and by not letting any presumptions and attitudes on my part influence the interview questions. The interview questions were constructed with this in mind, not showing my own attitudes, and follow-



up questions were asked based on each interviewee's answers, rather than any presumptions on my part. Leading questions as well as ambiguous or loaded words were avoided (Dörnyei 2007:138), i.e. threats to the *internal validity* have been eliminated to the extent possible, ensuring that there are no errors in the internal design of the study which might lead to false conclusions (Neuman 2014:221). Relatedly, a common criticism towards the grounded theory approach is that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the researcher to approach a topic with a completely open mind (Denscombe 2010:119). All researchers are inevitably influenced by their existing knowledge and experiences, and by previous concepts and theories outlined in the theoretical background, which must be considered necessary in order to avoid 'reinventing the wheel' and be able to learn from previous research (Denscombe 2010:119). In addition, the objective of the grounded theory approach to arrive at completely new theories cannot be reached through merely four interviewees' responses.

Another disadvantage is the fact that the results cannot be generalised or seen as representative for all EFL teachers in Sweden, as they are merely based on four individual teachers' responses. In other words, there is little *external validity* (Mackey & Gass 2005:119). The use of a mixed-method approach including observations would arguably have increased the reliability of the results, but for restrictions of time and scope, this was not possible in the present study. However, generalisability was never the aim of this study. Instead, the aim goes hand in hand with some of the advantages of interviewing, namely the fact that interviews can produce data which deal with something in great depth and detail, as well as provide the researcher with valuable insights (Denscombe 2010:201). Any generalisations attempted at, in line with the aim of grounded theory to arrive at new concepts and theories, are merely *theoretical* generalisations not meant to suggest that they apply to the majority of the group or setting investigated (Denscombe 2010:119).



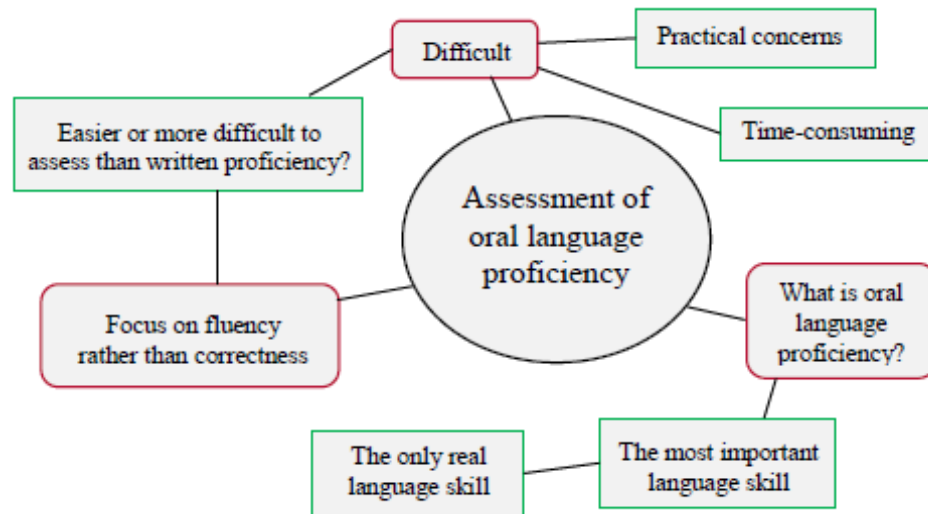
Moreover, complex issues, to which oral proficiency assessment must be counted, are particularly appropriate to explore using a qualitative method such as interviewing (Denscombe 2010:186), and the flexibility of semi-structured interviews in particular allows the interviewees to develop their ideas in open-ended answers (Denscombe 2010:186), giving the researcher insights into which aspects each interviewee prioritises.

## 4 Results and discussion

In the following sections, the main themes identified in the data are discussed in light of previous research and school policy documents. Figures 1–4 present the coding categories relating to each theme. In the *open coding* stage, all categories in the same “branch” in the figures were coded together. These codes were refined in the *axial coding* stage, in which subcategories within each branch were distinguished (green, yellow and blue boxes), and lastly, some categories were separated as less significant in the *selective coding* stage, allowing me to arrive at the final, key coding categories presented in the figures below.

### 4.1 The assessment of oral language proficiency

This first section discusses some general findings on oral proficiency assessment. Figure 1 outlines general themes identified in the coding.



**Figure 1.** The assessment of oral language proficiency.

A striking tendency in all respondents' answers is their view of oral language proficiency as the most important language skill and as an important part of teaching and assessment, as illustrated by the following quotes:

- (1) That's one of the most important things I think, speaking, since if they want something, argue, they need to be able to speak. You can get away with not being able to write. (Mark)
- (2) I think you should include lots and lots of oral activities. (Elizabeth)

Some answers even suggest a tendency to view oral language proficiency as the only real language skill:

- (3) Strong language often indicates strong writing. (Steven)

Here Steven compares spoken and written language, but refers to spoken language as simply 'language', indicating that 'language' equals spoken language. In other words, quotes 1–3 support Apelgren and Oscarsson's (2011:12) finding that oral proficiency assessment is prioritised and considered important in relation to grading. However, some of the respondents' answers contradict their suggestion that "Classroom observation



of oral communication' is by far the most common assessment activity" (Apelgren and Oscarsson's 2011:11):

- (4) I think that [oral proficiency in grading] is often a little forgotten compared to reading and writing, because you do that so much more often. (Paul)
- (5) I'm afraid that written proficiency is valued higher, since that's where you can see language accuracy. (Elizabeth)

In other words, oral communication is considered important in assessment, but many teachers rely more on written assignments when it comes to grading (Apelgren & Oscarson 2011:12). A reason why oral proficiency is not prioritised here seems to be practical difficulties related to it, for example its inevitable time-consuming character:

- (6) It [the assessment of oral language proficiency] is a bit more troublesome. It's practically harder. (Paul)
- (7) I assess written proficiency much more, since that's so much easier, that they write something that I collect, compared to giving everyone the chance to show their oral language proficiency [...] **Q: So it's for practical, time-related reasons...?** Yes, otherwise I would do that [assess oral proficiency] a lot. (Elizabeth)

In addition to oral proficiency assessment being difficult for practical reasons, all respondents expressed frustration in their answers to a question regarding the difficulty of assessing oral proficiency, again in line with Apelgren and Oscarsson's (2011:11) finding that many teachers think of oral proficiency as being hard to assess. However, some answers actually highlight reasons why oral language proficiency might be easier to assess than written proficiency:

- (8) You don't have the time to assess every aspect, you get a sense of what they know. It's a kind of instinctive feel, you feel the fluency [...] you can't assess everything, grammar... so, it's fluency you have to assess. (Mark)

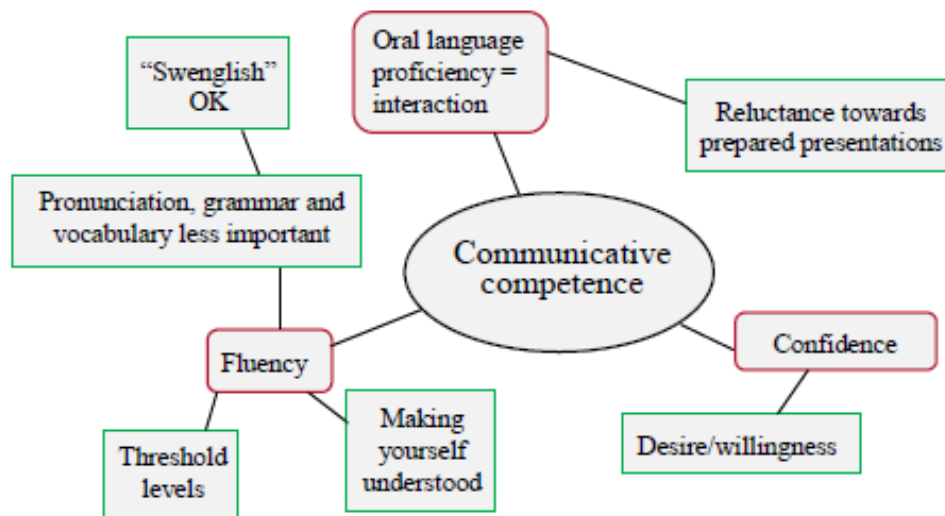


- (9) I don't always hear the mistakes. I see them when I read, but I don't always hear them, if it sounds good. [...] But you get an assessment of fluency, and I think... that might be easier in oral language proficiency, since maybe they have better fluency. (Elizabeth)

The reasons Mark and Elizabeth give as to why oral language proficiency might be easier to assess than the written equivalent is that they do not hear language mistakes to the same extent, and rather than assessing correctness, they assess *fluency*, an aspect elaborated further in the following section.

## 4.2 Communicative competence and fluency

Figure 2 presents coding themes relating to communicative competence and fluency.



**Figure 2.** Communicative competence.

First, all respondents gave similar answers to the question of what oral language proficiency means to them, namely communication or, more specifically, interaction:



- (10) I think you have to consider what the goal is for students to study English at all. Because interaction must be what's most important. (Steven)
- (11) The interactive part of conversation. That's what I think is absolutely most important. (Paul)
- (12) I mean, assessing their oral language proficiency like that [through presentations] is difficult. I can assess structure, pronunciation, vocabulary, content, but the actual oral language performance is so unnatural. Of course I can assess pronunciation and fluency and those kinds of things, but interaction is definitely more important to me. **Q: It almost sounds like “oral language proficiency” equals interaction to you?** Yes, it is interaction! (Elizabeth)

As evident in (12), Elizabeth, as well as the other respondents, are reluctant to use prepared presentations as a basis for oral proficiency assessment, but instead focus mostly, or entirely, on interaction. In other words, they stress the ability to interact in English as the most important language skill, perhaps influenced by the strong emphasis in the syllabus on communicative competence (cf. section 2.2). Moreover, several answers stress the importance of students' confidence and desire to use English, as also expressed in the syllabus (Skolverket 2011a) and as emphasised by Van Ek's (1986) social competence (cf. section 2.2). Some of the respondents state this as a reason for not assessing students' oral language proficiency continuously in the classroom, as they feel this might make students more nervous and reluctant to use the language.

Generally, all respondents constantly return to the concept of communication and communicative competence. Many of the answers relate strongly to the most basic type of communicative competence, namely *threshold levels* (van Ek 1986), as well as strategic competence (see section 4.4), and, to a certain extent, sociolinguistic competence, rather than grammatical competence. The importance of threshold levels is illustrated in (13)–(15):





- (13) When they get their message across, when it works in practice but it's not good, they need to work on it [...] An F to me is when they don't get it across... communication. (Mark)
- (14) Getting meaning across is some kind of basic level, that you understand what they say. (Paul)
- (15) Oral language proficiency is really about making yourself understood, for an E. (Elizabeth)

The most important aspect seems to be getting your meaning across and making yourself understood, rather than using correct grammar, native-like pronunciation or varied and sophisticated vocabulary. Thus, Louma's (2004:10) notion that pronunciation is an important aspect of oral proficiency assessment is not supported in the present data, although parallels could be drawn to her concept of communicative effectiveness (cf. section 2.3). Relatedly, the concept of fluency is valued highly by all respondents; they all mention it in relation to other questions before being asked a question relating specifically to fluency. All define fluency as being able to speak without too much hesitation and hindrance and Elizabeth provides the following metaphorical definition:

- (16) How I'm just like a water flowing between rocks, when I have that feeling, it's good. It can be at different levels, language-wise [...] but if I hit a log, stop... there is a tree, stop... then it's not good. When you just feel the flow, then it's good. (Elizabeth)

Furthermore, all respondents agree that (their definition of) fluency is more important in oral proficiency assessment than the students' grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation:

- (17) **Q: What is most important to you when you assess oral language proficiency? Do you focus more on some aspect than others?** Can I say communication? That includes everything, but for me it's fluency [...] I'm all in for communication. If it doesn't disturb communication, they can have whatever pronunciation they want. (Mark)



- (18) I don't really want to evaluate pronunciation with a grade. (Elizabeth)
- (19) Pronunciation is not important at all to me, since we have so many students from other countries, and there's nothing wrong with that, just as there's nothing wrong with Swenglish. (Steven)

This finding supports the principle of threshold-level theories that foreign-language learning is more effective if emphasis is put on getting one's meaning across rather than on grammatical accuracy (Canale & Swain 1980:10). Also, all respondents agree that "Swenglish" is accepted, and Steven (in quote 19) highlights the importance of acknowledging the many different varieties of English existing in Sweden and the world today (cf. Louma 2004:10). Paul, however, does highlight the importance of correctness in language, if it influences whether the students can make themselves understood. Thus, again, some kind of threshold level is emphasised, although grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation are not disregarded completely:

- (20) The content must be clear, you mustn't change the meaning of a word by pronouncing it wrong. (Paul)
- (21) Again, content is important, getting that across. Some grammar mistakes can lead to not getting the content across, or changing it completely. (Paul)

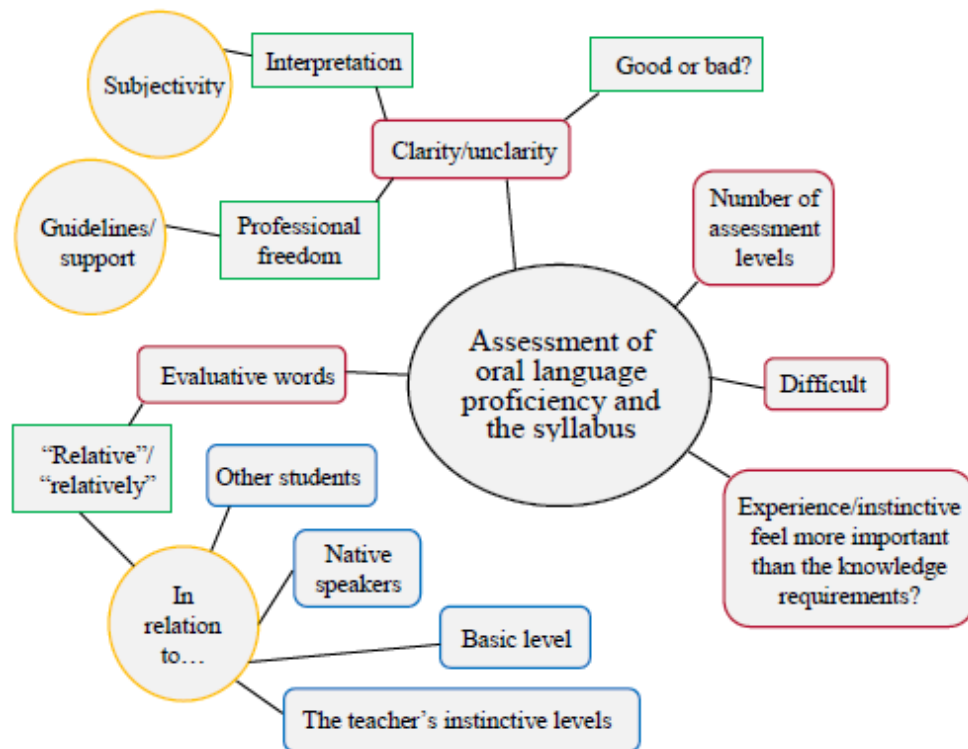
Lastly, all respondents, not least Elizabeth, continuously relate the concept of communicative competence, and fluency in particular, to the use of strategies:

- (22) It [strategies] is related to fluency, I think. For example, I usually say it's an F if you include Swedish words. You need strategies to get around this. And then I think it might be okay with some hesitation when the student is thinking of a way around this. Then I shouldn't view this negatively, just because it influences fluency. But if you need to think of strategies to get around problems all the time, then there's no fluency. (Elizabeth)

The assessment of strategies is discussed in detail in section 4.4. First, the following section elaborates on some aspects relating to the syllabus and knowledge requirements.

### 4.3 The assessment of oral language proficiency and the syllabus

Figure 3 presents the coding for aspects concerned with oral proficiency assessment in relation to the syllabus and knowledge requirements.



**Figure 3.** The assessment of oral language proficiency and the syllabus.

As with many other themes in the interview, the questions relating to the knowledge criteria gave rise to some frustration and answers indicating the difficulty of interpreting the criteria and assessing students' performance objectively and fairly. Several answers indicate that the teachers have developed some sort of instinctive feel for how to assess oral language proficiency, that they have developed their own interpretation of the criteria, and that experience is important:

(23) I might be wrong... but to me it's an instinctive feel. (Mark)



- (24) I have to trust my gut feeling and many years' experience. But if you're new? Oh my! Haha, how do you do it then? When you've met around 5,000 students, of course you've developed a feel for who is sort of E, C and A. (Elizabeth)

Regarding the number of assessment levels in the criteria, three of the respondents are pleased with the current five levels for a passing grade, while the fourth one would prefer fewer levels. When it comes to the interpretation of the knowledge criteria in general and the evaluative words for each level specifically, all agree that it is, to a certain extent, a matter of subjective interpretation which is difficult to avoid, not least in oral proficiency assessment (cf. Sandlund and Sundqvist's (2016) and Louma's (2004) discussions of oral proficiency assessment being highly divergent partly due to the fact that there are so many factors to take into account).

As discussed in section 2.1, assessment criteria should be concrete and not include unclear evaluative words (Louma 2004:81–82). The respondents expressed some frustration with their experience of the knowledge criteria being vague with evaluative words subject to interpretation:

- (25) That's... yeah it's hard, since it's subjective words. (Steven)  
(26) I would like some more clarity! More concrete. (Mark)  
(27) Yeah, that's really difficult. I think the knowledge requirements are really fussy. (Elizabeth)

One respondent, Mark, requests more support and guidelines from the Swedish National Agency for Education in the interpretation of the criteria. Paul, on the other hand, highlights a positive aspect of the assessment criteria not being too concrete, namely that it allows for professional freedom for teachers:

- (28) I think they are unclear to allow for some interpretation. (Paul)

An evaluative word discussed in some more detail in the interviews was *relative* or *relatively*, as in “students can express themselves in **relatively**



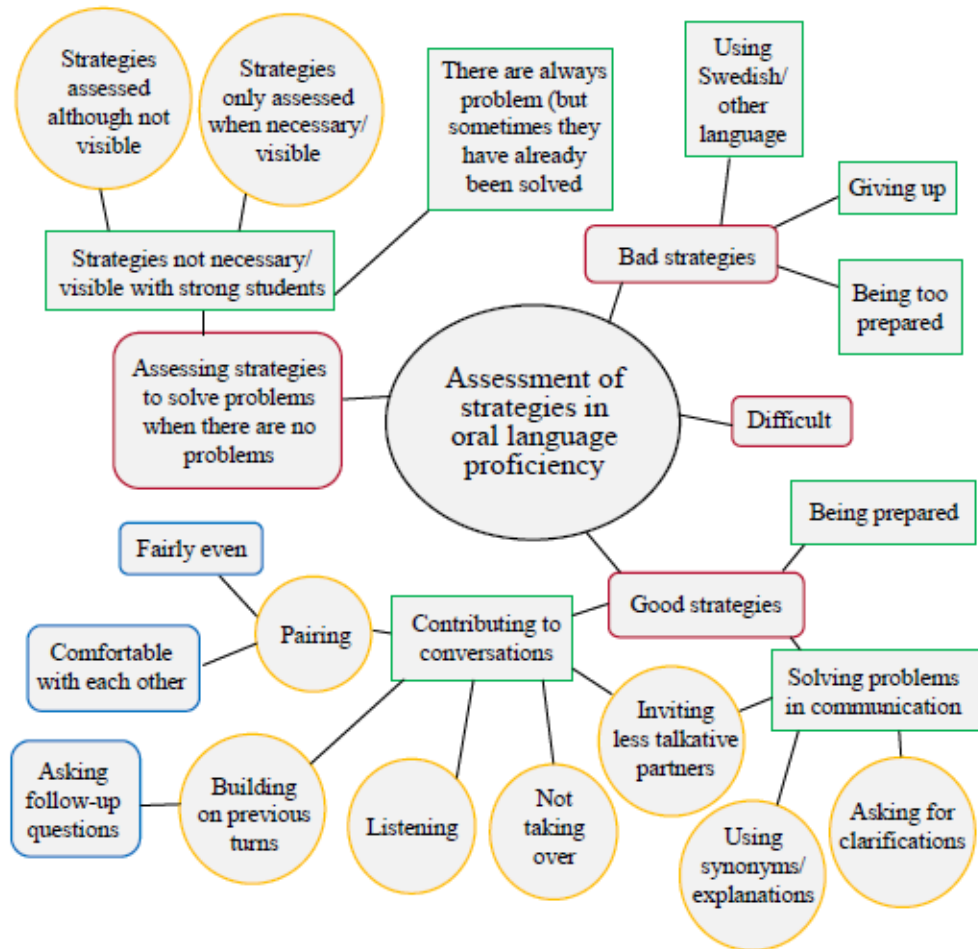
varied ways, **relatively** clearly and **relatively** coherently” (Skolverket 2011a, emphasis in original). The respondents have different views on how this word should be interpreted. For example, Mark suggests that students’ performances be assessed in relation to The Swedish National Agency for Education’s examples of student performances, Paul says that he assesses in relation to some kind of basic level (cf. *threshold levels* above), and Elizabeth suggests that student performances be assessed in relation to native speakers. In other words, including such evaluative words in knowledge criteria seems to lead to different assessment by different raters (cf. Louma (2004:82) and Sandlund & Sundqvist (2016:129)). In addition, all respondents mention the risk of students’ performances being assessed against each other, despite the current Swedish grading system not being relative as such.

Lastly, to the question of what they would do if they could change the knowledge requirements somehow, none of the respondents present a clear answer and some are pleased with the current requirements, despite their flaws, since they cannot think of any improvements, an answer which proves how difficult it is to formulate functional assessment criteria. Steven suggests that the criteria include stronger emphasis on confidence to use the language (cf. 4.2 above) and both Steven and Elizabeth suggest that oral interaction be given higher priority in relation to production. Paul expresses a desire to include aspects of language reception, i.e. listening, in oral interaction, which he also deems an important communicative strategy. The assessment of strategies is discussed in the following section.



#### 4.4 The assessment of strategies in oral production and interaction

Figure 4 outlines the coding categories relating to students' use of strategies and the teachers' assessment of this.



**Figure 4.** The assessment of strategies in oral language proficiency.

First of all, in all interviews, it was clear that strategies are considered an important part of oral language proficiency. Just as with fluency, strategies were mentioned by all respondents before specific questions on this theme were asked, confirming Sandlund and Sundqvist's (2016:129) preliminary finding that teachers value communicative strategies as an important



assessment criterion. Also, some of the interview questions regarding strategies were among those the respondents found most difficult to answer, not least questions relating to the assessment of strategies to solve problems (see more in 4.4.2 below):

- (29) That's also difficult, strategies... Ehm... Now you highlight something I might need to work on a bit actually, hehe... (Steven)

#### **4.4.1 Good and bad strategies**

One type of strategy emphasised by the respondents relates to Canale and Swain's (1980:30) definition of strategic competence, namely strategies necessary to compensate for lack of grammatical or sociolinguistic competence. Specifically, all respondents discuss strategies used by students when they do not know or cannot remember a word in English, in other words Canale and Swain's (1980:30) strategic competence to compensate for breakdowns in grammatical competence. All agree that a strategy for which students should be rewarded is attempts to give synonyms or explain the word in English, provided this does not happen too often:

- (30) We look a lot at the fact that many get stuck on words, and whether they can move on from that obstacle by describing it in some other way, using body language. (Paul)
- (31) You can take detours, if you don't know a word you can explain it, and if there are too many such detours, it disturbs communication. (Mark)

Interestingly, even though all respondents are accepting of all kinds of pronunciation, including so-called "Swenglish", as long as the student gets their meaning across (in line with threshold levels and perhaps also influenced by today's multicultural society), they also have strong negative opinions on students' use of a Swedish word when they cannot think of the English equivalent, despite the current trend towards allowing translanguaging in the language classroom (see e.g. Källkvist et. al. 2017):



- (32) When you start using Swedish words instead of English, it's usually at an F-level. (Steven)
- (33) Using words in Swedish. You don't even try, and then I'm usually clear with saying "this is an F". Because an Englishman wouldn't be able to understand. (Elizabeth)

In other words, "Swenglish" pronunciation is accepted, but using Swedish words is not. However, Elizabeth mentions a possible reason for this: if you have "Swenglish" pronunciation you can still make yourself understood, whereas those who do not know Swedish would not understand you if you used Swedish words. How distinctly "Swenglish" your pronunciation can be before speakers from other parts of the world do not understand you may be discussed, however.

Another strategy viewed negatively by the respondents is giving up, beforehand or during communication, e.g. telling yourself there is something you cannot do or understand, or not even trying to work around any problems that may occur. Instead, they reward students who try, give themselves time to figure out what to say and how to say it (cf. Louma's (2004:18) fixed phrases and fillers) and ask for clarifications if there is something they do not understand. Additionally, and related to the hesitation to assess oral presentations as opposed to spontaneous interaction, two of the respondents also view being too prepared negatively:

- (34) You can prepare a lot, like pronunciation, dialect and knowledge, but being spontaneous is what shows that you really know it. So that's really all I focus on, real oral language proficiency, spontaneous. (Steven)

The other main type of strategy discussed by the respondents relates to the syllabus formulation "strategies for contributing to and actively participating in discussions" (Skolverket 2011a). All participants value this type of strategy highly, and two of the respondents report on this being something they work with together with the students to help them communicate in English and





prepare them for assessments. Generally, however, the respondents do not include communicative strategies in teaching, although they emphasise them in formative and summative assessment. Examples of communicative strategies to contribute to communication mentioned by the respondents include building on what the conversation partner has said and relating this to oneself (cf. Louma 2004:28), asking questions and follow-up questions and inviting less talkative partners into the conversation. One of the respondents, Paul, stresses the importance of listening as a strategy in oral communication, partly since he deems this a crucial strategy to be able to keep a conversation going, and partly since he views the current assessment of listening comprehension, not least in the national test, as “incredibly outdated and poor”. Instead, he would prefer listening comprehension to be included in the assessment of oral interaction.

Regarding challenges related to pairing students for oral interaction, the respondents mention the risks involved in pairing students at different levels, e.g. more proficient students taking over, or the students being assessed against each other (cf. Sandlund & Sundqvist 2016:128). However, the most important consideration seems to be that the students should be comfortable with each other; the respondents often let their students choose with whom to work. The reasons for this relate to the importance of confidence and desire to use the language, as discussed in sections 2.2 and 4.2. Two related aspects mentioned are the responsibility of weak or shy students to take part in communication, as well as stronger students not to take over (cf. Sandlund & Sundqvist 2016:129). In other words, collaborative attempts to keep the conversation going seem to be rewarded, in line with Tornberg’s (2009:56) interactive approach to communicative strategies.



#### **4.4.2 Strategies to solve problems**

A specific area of interest regarding strategies in the present study is how teachers assess students' "strategies to solve problems and improve their interaction" (Skolverket 2011a). Specifically, I was interested in investigating whether there are assessment situations in which such problems do not occur, and, if so, how teachers then assess this knowledge requirement. These questions were generally puzzling for the respondents, and they recognise the complexity of the issue:

- (35) Hehehe... I don't know... I think that when you have a good conversation, you've solved the problems. (Elizabeth)
- (36) But I thought you were only meant to assess strategies if they're necessary... this is a bit hard to grasp. (Mark)

The respondents agree that there are situations in student interaction in which problems do not occur, since the student is highly proficient or has prepared well. However, some express the view that the problems have already been solved in these cases:

- (37) I think there are problems whatever you're going to talk about. It's just that strong students don't see it, it's no problem to them, and then they've solved the problem [...] I think no problems occur since the student has solved them. (Elizabeth)

As Canale and Swain (1980:31) point out, knowledge and use of strategies may be most relevant at early stages of language learning, and the more proficient and mature the learner grows, the less they will need strategies to solve problems and compensate for insufficient language competence. The respondents express attitudes supporting this – that some students do not seem to need strategies due to a high level of proficiency – illustrating also the complexity of strategies and the challenges involved in including this as an assessment criterion:



- (38) So if I can speak English well [...] what strategies do I need? (Mark)
- (39) I'm just thinking, isn't the best sign of functional strategies that you don't notice them? Because if interaction works, strategies are probably there without being noticed [...] I don't really look at strategies if everything works. (Steven)

This goes hand in hand with the guidelines by the Swedish National Agency for Education, in which Börjesson (2012:19) stresses the importance for teachers to try to understand how students think regarding their use (or not) of strategies. However, it is certainly a demanding task to assess something which cannot be observed. This might also be a reason why the Swedish National Agency for Education's draft of a new syllabus for English (Skolverket 2019) avoids the aspect of strategies to solve problems. The current formulation (for the grade of E), "students can choose and use **essentially** functional strategies which **to some extent** solve problems and improve their interaction" (emphasis in original), has been replaced with "the student uses strategies which to some extent facilitates and improves interaction" (my translation). This also proves how complex and problematic it is for teachers to assess this knowledge requirement. Additionally, since teachers seem to struggle with how to assess strategies, the reasons for reformulating this in the new syllabus should be communicated clearly to teachers, and there should be guidelines on how to interpret the new criteria.

#### 4.5 Method discussion

As outlined in section 3.5, a dilemma of the grounded theory approach is the difficulty to approach a topic which has previously been quite extensively explored with a completely open mind. Despite the endeavour to analyse the data of the present study with an open mind and not be bound by what has been theorised on the topic previously, there is no denying that many of the findings correspond to already existing theories and research on oral



proficiency assessment. However, the application of grounded theory was still valuable in the present investigation, since no clear theory exists as regards certain aspects of the study (Cho & Lee 2014:5), e.g. the assessment of strategy use.

In addition, the interview guide, which was based on previous research, inevitably influences the tendency of certain themes to occur in the data. The interview data were coded without consideration to previous research; however, once all data had been coded, it became obvious that the themes identified largely correspond to previous research. However, this is an inevitable limitation of the approach, and arguably a necessary one to allow the researcher to build on previous research and gain new insights into an already explored topic. The present study applied the inductive approach of grounded theory, although the results arrived at may seem deductive in their correspondence to existing theories. Arguably, the holistic approach to the data analysed here was enabled by the application of grounded theory, and would not have been possible with a more selective approach. A further reason for using grounded theory is the well-defined analysis procedure applied (Cho & Lee 2014:15).

## 5 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate what views EFL teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools have on oral proficiency assessment, how they work with this in practice and how they view and interpret the related knowledge requirements in the syllabus. The findings suggest that this is a complex issue which teachers struggle with. All respondents agree that oral proficiency is the most important language skill, and that oral language proficiency equals interaction rather than production. Additionally, the findings strongly indicate the importance of fluency and communicative competence in teachers' view and assessment of oral language proficiency, not least the so-called threshold



levels, stressing the importance of getting one's meaning across rather than using perfect grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. In addition, the results suggest that grading criteria are interpreted differently by different teachers, not least illustrated by the many ways in which the respondents interpret the word "relative". This is one of the findings which confirm the complexity of assessing oral language proficiency.

A particular focus of this study was summative assessment of strategies in oral language proficiency, and the findings stress that teachers value these highly in assessment. Strategies they reward include using synonyms or explanations for missing words, and strategies to keep a conversation going. On the other hand, using Swedish synonyms and giving up are viewed negatively. The findings also indicate the complexity of assessing the knowledge requirement of strategies to solve problems in communication, when there are no such problems. The challenge of assessing this particular aspect is also highlighted by the Swedish National Agency for Education's suggestion to avoid this formulation in the revised syllabus.

Conclusively, the findings confirm the importance of clear and functional grading criteria and guidelines on how to interpret them, e.g. regarding evaluative words and strategy use. Arguably, teachers need to engage in collegial discussions when assessing oral language proficiency, and the results of the present study could serve as a point of departure in such discussions.

An interesting complement to the present study would have been to observe assessment situations and investigate and compare how teachers actually assess students' oral language performances, looking for example at recorded student presentations or discussions and teachers' assessments and discussions of these. In addition, future studies could explore the role of Swedish and other languages in the EFL classroom, considering the somewhat contradicting views on this in the data of the present study, i.e. that "Swenglish" is accepted but the use of Swedish words is not.



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## Appendix 1 – Interview guide

### **Bakgrund**

- Hur länge har du arbetat som lärare?
- Vad har du för utbildning?
- Vilka kurser/årskurser och grupper undervisar du nu? (Undervisar du andra ämnen än engelska? Vilka?)
- Använder du uteslutande engelska i undervisningen eller även svenska? Varför?

### **Summativ bedömning av muntlig språkfärdighet**

- Hur ser du på relationen mellan formativ och summativ bedömning av muntlig förmåga?
- Vad innebär muntlig färdighet i engelska för dig?
- Beskriv det senaste tillfället då du bedömde dina elevers muntliga språkfärdighet summativt. (Vilken typ av aktivitet var det, och varför? Hur bedömdes den?)
- Hur svårt eller lätt tycker du att det är att bedöma muntlig förmåga rättvist jämfört med andra språkliga färdigheter, som skrivande?
- Vad är enkelt när det kommer till bedömning av muntlig förmåga? Vad är svårt?
- Vad är viktigast för dig när du bedömer muntlig färdighet? (Att eleven kan göra sig förstådd, att det finns ett flyt, grammatik, ordförråd, uttal, etc.? Fokuserar du mer på någon aspekt än andra? Varför?)
- Är dina elever medvetna om när de bedöms summativt och inte, och hur informerar du dem om detta?
- Hur ofta bedömer du elevernas muntliga förmåga summativt?



- Bedömer du elevers muntliga språkförmåga framförallt löpande eller genom mer formella testsituationer? Varför? (Hur stor roll spelar det nationella provet?)
- Hur viktig är bedömningen av muntlig förmåga vid betygsättning i relation till bedömningen av andra förmågor (skriva, läsa, lyssna)? (Hur stor del av detta väger in i slutbetyget?)
- Hur tänker du kring par- eller gruppsammansättning vid bedömning av muntlig interaktion?

**Muntlig språkfärdighet i förhållande till kursplanen i engelska (utdrag ur ämnesplanen visas då frågorna ställs)**

- Hur lätt eller svårt är det att bestämma vilket betygssteg en muntlig språkprestation ligger på?
- Hur tolkar du formuleringarna i kunskapskraven för respektive betygsnivå, framförallt när det kommer till värdeorden för de olika stegen, såsom *relativt*, *godtagbart* och *med viss säkerhet*?
- Hur tolkar du ordet *flyt* i kunskapskraven?
- Uttal nämns inte i kunskapskraven – bedömer du elevernas uttal, och i så fall hur? (modersmålslikt, förståeligt, etc.)
- Vad innebär åtskillnaden mellan muntlig framställning respektive interaktion för dig? Hur bedömer du respektive förmåga?
- Hur ser du på att kunskapskraven inte gör någon åtskillnad mellan skriftlig respektive muntlig kommunikation?
- Använder du något annat hjälpmedel än kunskapskraven vid bedömning av muntlig framställning och interaktion, exv. egna matriser?
- Om du kunde ändra kunskapskraven på något sätt, hur skulle du då ändra dem, om alls?



### **Bedömning av strategier i muntlig framställning och interaktion**

- Ämnesplanen för engelska betonar elevernas användning av strategier, och dessa ska även bedömas enligt kunskapskraven. Hur bedömer du strategier i muntlig framställning respektive interaktion?
- Vilken typ av strategier (undervisar och) bedömer du?
- Kan du ge exempel på ”bra” respektive ”dåliga” strategier?
- Hur ser du specifikt på formuleringen angående strategianvändning vid problem i kommunikationen? (Uppstår situationer när eleverna inte får möjlighet att visa användning av strategier då problem inte uppstår? Vad kan detta i så fall bero på?)

### Translation

#### **Background**

- For how long have you worked as a teacher?
- What is your educational background?
- What courses/school years and groups do you teach right now? (Do you teach any other subjects than English? Which?)
- Do you use English exclusively in the classroom or do you also use Swedish? Why?



### **Summative assessment of oral language proficiency**

- What is your view on the relationship between formative and summative assessment of oral language proficiency?
- What does oral language proficiency in English mean to you?
- Describe the last time you assessed your students' oral language proficiency summatively. (What kind of activity was it, and why? How did you assess it?)
- How difficult or easy is it to assess oral language proficiency compared to other language skills, e.g. writing?
- What is easy when it comes to assessment of oral language proficiency? What is difficult?
- What is most important to you when you assess oral language proficiency? (That the student can make themselves understood, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.? Do you focus more on some aspects than others? Why?)
- Are your students aware of when they are assessed summatively and not, and how do you inform them of this?
- How often do you assess students' oral language proficiency summatively?
- Do you assess students' oral language proficiency continuously or more through formal test situations? Why? How important is the national test?
- How important is assessment of oral language proficiency in relation grading compared to assessment of other abilities (writing, reading, listening)? (To what extent does assessment of oral language proficiency decide a student's final overall grade?)
- What are your thoughts on pairing or grouping in assessment of oral interaction?



**Oral language proficiency in relation to the syllabus (extracts from the syllabus are shown as the questions are asked)**

- How easy or difficult is it to decide the assessment grade of a student's oral language performance?
- How do you interpret the knowledge requirements for each assessment grade, especially when it comes to the evaluative words for each grade, such as *relatively*, *acceptable* and *with some certainty*?
- How do you interpret the word *fluency* in the knowledge requirements?
- Pronunciation is not mentioned in the knowledge requirements – do you assess students' pronunciation, and, if so, how? (native-like, comprehensible, etc.)
- What does the distinction between oral production and oral interaction mean to you? How do you assess each ability?
- What are your thoughts on the fact that the knowledge requirements do not distinguish between written and oral communication?
- Do you use any other aids than the knowledge requirements in your assessment of oral language proficiency, e.g. matrices?
- If you could change the knowledge requirements, what would you change, if anything?

**Assessment of strategies in oral production and interaction**

- The syllabus emphasises students' use of strategies, and these must also be assessed according to the knowledge requirements. How do you assess strategies in oral production and interaction?
- What types of strategies do you (teach and) assess?
- Give examples of “good” and “bad” strategies respectively.



- What are your thoughts on the formulation concerning strategies to solve problems in communication? (Do situations occur when students do not have the opportunity to demonstrate their use of strategies, as there are no problems? If so, what could be the reasons for this?)



## Appendix 2 – Inquiry of interview participation

Hej,

Jag heter Malin Schultz och läser till gymnasielärare vid Linnéuniversitetet med ämnet engelska. Denna sista termin av programmet skriver jag mitt examensarbete, med fokus på bedömning av muntlig förmåga och kommunikation. Syftet med mitt arbete är att utveckla min kunskap inom detta komplexa område, och jag ämnar göra det genom att genomföra ett antal intervjuer med lärare, för att på så sätt få en förståelse för hur verksamma lärare arbetar med och reflekterat kring bedömning av muntliga språkfärdigheter, samt ser på styrdokumentens målformuleringar inom området.

Detta mejl är en förfrågan till dig att medverka i en sådan intervju. Genom att medverka bidrar du med värdefull information till mitt arbete. Din medverkan är helt frivillig och du kan när som helst välja att avbryta din medverkan. All data som samlas in under intervjuerna behandlas konfidentiellt och kommer enbart användas i denna studie. Dina svar kommer vara helt anonyma och inget publicerat material kommer kunna härledas till en enskild person – den enda som kommer ta del av den icke anonymiserade datan är jag själv. Intervjun beräknas ta ca 1 timme.

Med vänlig hälsning,

Malin



## Translation

Hello,

My name is Malin Schultz and I am in the final semester of a teacher training programme at Linnæus University, specialising in the subject of English. I am currently conducting my degree project focusing on assessment of oral language proficiency. The aim of the project is to develop my knowledge in this complex field, and to do this I plan on conducting a number of interviews with teachers, in order to develop an understanding of how teachers work with and reflect on assessment of oral language proficiency, as well as their views on the knowledge requirements.

This e-mail is an inquiry for participation in such an interview. By participating, you would contribute with valuable information to my project. Your participation is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw your participation at any time. All data collected in the interviews are handled confidentially and will only be used in this study. Your answers are completely anonymous and no published material will enable identification of individuals. I am the only one with access to the non-anonymous data. The interview is expected to last approximately 1 hour.

Best regards,

Malin





## Appendix 3 – Quotes

- (1) men det är en av de största tycker jag, tala, eftersom om de vill saker, om de vill argumentera, man måste kunna tala. Skriva kommer man undan med lite om man inte kan (Mark)
- (2) alltså jag tycker att man ska ägna sig jättejättemycket åt muntliga aktiviteter (Elizabeth)
- (3) starkt språk är oftast en indikator på stark skrift (Steven)
- (4) Jag tror nog ofta att det [muntlig förmåga vid betygsättning] kommer lite i skymundan faktiskt, från, jämfört med läs och skriv, för att det är det man gör så mycket oftare (Paul)
- (5) Eh... jag är rädd för att, kanske det skriftliga ibland ändå väger tyngre, för det är där man kan se den språkliga korrektheten (Elizabeth)
- (6) Det [bedömning av muntlig förmåga] är lite bökigare. Så rent praktiskt är det svårare (Paul)
- (7) Jag bedömer det skriftliga väldigt mycket mer, därför att det är så mycket enklare, att de skriver och jag plockar in, än att de ska alla ha möjlighet att visa vad de går för muntligt [...] **Så det är av praktiska, tidsmässiga skäl framförallt...?** Absolut, annars skulle jag göra det hur mycket som helst. (Elizabeth)
- (8) Man har inte sådan tid att granska varje del, men man får en bättre känsla av vad de kan. Det känns lite som fingertoppskänsla, man känner flytet. [...] man hinner ju inte i sin monitor granska alla delarna, grammatik, men, så det blir flytet som man får gå lite på (Mark)
- (9) jag hör inte alltid felen. Jag ser dem när jag läser dem, men jag hör dem inte alltid, eh, om det låter bra. [...] Men man får en bedömning i flyt, och det tycker jag... det är kanske lättare muntligt, för de har ofta ett bättre flyt kanske. (Elizabeth)



- (10) Alltså jag tycker att man ska tänka på vad är målet med att elever går på engelska överhuvudtaget? För interaktionen måste ju vara A och O (Steven)
- (11) den interaktiva delen av samtalet. Så det är det jag tycker är det allra viktigaste. (Paul)
- (12) alltså att bedöma dem muntligt på det [presentationer] tycker jag är svårt. Jag bedömde dem strukturmässigt, uttalsmässigt, ordmässigt, innehållsmässigt, men själva det muntliga är ju så konstlat. [...] jag kan självklart bedöma uttal och flyt och sådana saker, men för mig är interaktionen, den väger tyngre, helt klart.  
**Det låter nästan som att, när du säger "muntligt" så är det interaktion för dig?** Det är interaktion! (Elizabeth)
- (13) när de får fram budskapet, när det funkar i praktiken, men det är inte bra, alltså de behöver jobba på det. Eh... alltså ett F för mig det är när det inte når fram, kommunikation (Mark)
- (14) att innehållet går fram på något sätt är ju någon slags grundnivå, att man förstår vad som sägs (Paul)
- (15) Muntlig färdighet är ju egentligen att kunna göra sig förstådd, för en E-nivå (Elizabeth)
- (16) hur jag bara är som ett vatten som flyter fram mellan stenarna och jag bara flyter på, när jag har den känslan, då är det bra. Det kan vara på olika språkliga nivåer [...] känner jag däremot att jag kommer till en stock, så, stopp, det kommer ett träd, stopp, då är det inte bra [...] när man känner att det bara flyter, då är det bra. (Elizabeth)
- (17) **Vad är viktigast för dig när du bedömer muntlig färdighet? Fokuserar du mer på någon aspekt än andra?** Kan jag säga kommunikation? Det innefattar ju allt, men för mig är det flytet. [...] Jag är all in för kommunikation. Om det inte stör kommunikation, då kan de ha vilket uttal de vill (Mark)



- (18) Egentligen så känner jag inte att jag vill värdera uttalet med ett betyg (Elizabeth)
- (19) Uttal lägger jag knappt någon vikt vid alls, för att vi har så pass många elever som kommer från andra länder och det är ju inget fel som helst, precis som jag tycker svengelska är inget fel i sig (Steven)
- (20) Innehållet ska gå fram, man ska inte förvränga betydelsen av ett ord genom felaktigt uttal (Paul)
- (21) Återigen, innehållet är det viktigaste, att det går fram, eh... vissa grammatiska fel gör att innehållet inte går fram, eller att det blir ett helt annat (Paul)
- (22) det [strategier] hänger lite ihop med flyt tycker jag [...] jag brukar till exempel säga att det är F om du blandar in svenska ord. Eh, du måste ha strategier för att komma runt. Och då kan jag tycka att ok det kanske stoppar upp när den här eleven sitter och tänker på en väg runt det här ordet man inte kommer på. Då ska jag inte hacka på den för det, för det blir ju inte samma flyt. Men om man hela tiden måste sitta och komma på saker runt det där man inte kan, då blir det ju inget flyt. (Elizabeth)
- (23) Jag har kanske helt fel men... jag kör lite på fingertoppskänsla (Mark)
- (24) ja där får man ju gå på magkänslan och många års erfarenhet. Men jag tänker när man är ny, oh my! Haha. Hur? Hur ska man göra? När man har träffat, som jag kanske 5000 elever, det är klart man har hittat en känsla för vilka är typ E, typ C, typ A (Elizabeth)
- (25) Det är... ja, det är ju svårt, för det är också subjektiva ord (Steven)
- (26) Lite tydligare skulle jag vilja ha! Lite mer konkret (Mark)
- (27) Ja, det är jättesvårt! Jag tycker också att kunskapskraven är väldigt luddiga (Elizabeth)



- (28) De är ju, upplever jag det, diffusa för att det ska finnas tolkningsutrymme (Paul)
- (29) Men det är också svårt det här med strategier... Eh... nej men nu belyser du faktiskt någonting jag kanske behöver jobba med lite extra faktiskt, hehe. (Steven)
- (30) vi tittar ju också mycket på att många fastnar ju, i ord, och då är det mycket såhär att kan du komma vidare från det här hindret genom att beskriva det på något annat sätt, att använda kroppsspråk (Paul)
- (31) Man kan ju ta omvägar, om man inte kan ett ord så kan man förklara det, och så blir det för mycket sådana omvägar så stör det kommunikationen (Mark)
- (32) när man börjar använda svenska ord istället för engelska, så brukar det vara på F-nivå (Steven)
- (33) att använda ord på svenska. Man försöker inte ens, och då brukar jag vara ganska tydlig att ”det blir F”. För det här hade inte en engelsman kunnat förstå (Elizabeth)
- (34) man kan förbereda väldigt, väldigt mycket, du kan förbereda uttal och dialekt och kunskaper, men det är ju den spontana som är att man kan faktiskt, [...] Så det är egentligen det enda jag utgår från, den riktiga muntliga färdigheten, det spontana. (Steven)
- (35) Hehehe... jag vet inte... jag tror att när man får till ett bra samtal så har man löst problemen. (Elizabeth)
- (36) Men jag trodde att man bara skulle bedöma strategierna om de behövdes... det är lite svårt att fatta det. (Mark)
- (37) Alltså jag tror att det finns problem att lösa i vad du än ska prata om. Det är bara det att den duktiga eleven ser det inte... det är inget problem för den, och då har man ju löst problemet [...] jag tror snarare att det är så att det blir inget problem för att eleven löser det (Elizabeth)



- (38) Så om jag kan prata engelska bra [...] vad behöver jag då för strategier? (Mark)
- (39) Jag tänker bara, är inte det bästa tecknet på att strategier funkar att man inte märker av dem? För är interaktionen bra, då finns ju säkert strategierna där obemärkt liksom. [...] Jag tittar inte så mycket på strategier om allting är som det ska. (Steven)