



CULTURE-LANGUAGES-MEDIA

## **Degree Project with Specialization in English Studies and Education**

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### **A Study of Pupils' Self-Reported Speaking Anxiety Through Game-Based Learning**

*En studie i elevers själv-rapporterade talängslan genom spelbaserat lärande*

**Moa Mannerström**

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Examiner: Zita Farkas

Supervisor: Malin Reljanovic Glimäng

## Abstract

Current research shows how elementary school learners can experience fear and occasionally foreign language anxiety when speaking English in class. Additional studies present that game-based learning can create a learning environment which allows anxious or nervous pupils to increase their oral interactions. However, studies containing both game-based learning and foreign language anxiety are limited and seemingly none have been conducted in a Swedish elementary school classroom. The aim of this study is to explore if game-based learning can be a supportive structure for Swedish year 4 learners who experience anxiety and fear when speaking English. An analog game, 'Go Fish', was implemented in a year 4 English lesson with the intention to encourage communication among the learners. The participating pupils were interviewed before and after the lesson regarding their reported anxiety-levels while speaking English, these interviews are the primary sources of the study. In order to supplement the pre- and post-interviews, the teacher was interviewed and the lesson was observed. Results from the collected data shows that all but one participant experienced anxiety or fear when speaking English out loud. A majority reportedly felt more comfortable speaking English when playing an analog game. This study's theoretical background suggests that the learners' reported foreign language anxiety decreased because of the scaffolding elements of game-based learning. These elements include social interaction, turn-taking, working in groups and playing a cooperative game. This implies that analog games could be a supportive structure for most year 4 learners. However, challenges such as sample size and a short timeframe were taken into consideration.

Key terms: *game-based learning, foreign language anxiety, elementary school, Sweden*

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Aim & Research Questions.....	5
<b>2. Background.....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Key Terms.....	6
2.1.1 Game-Based Learning.....	6
2.1.2 Foreign Language Anxiety.....	6
2.1.3 First, Second and Foreign Language.....	6
2.1.4 Scaffolding.....	7
2.2 Learning Theories and the Swedish Curriculum.....	7
2.2.1 Sociocultural Theory.....	7
2.2.2 Zone of Proximal Development.....	8
2.2.3 The Swedish Curriculum.....	8
2.3 Relevant Research.....	9
2.3.1 FLA and Low Self-Confidence Among Elementary School Learners.....	9
2.3.2 Different Versions of GBL Result in Different Outcomes.....	10
<b>3. Method.....</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1 Context and Participants.....	12
3.2 The Game.....	12
3.3 Materials/Instruments.....	13
3.3.1 Interviews.....	13
3.3.2 Observation.....	14
3.4 Procedure.....	14
3.5 Analysis.....	15
3.6 Ethical Considerations.....	16
<b>4. Results.....</b>	<b>18</b>
4.1 Creating an Encouraging Classroom Environment.....	18
4.2 Ways to Scaffold Verbal Language Usage.....	19
4.3 Performing in Groups.....	21
4.4 Results of the Collected Quantitative Data.....	22
<b>5. Discussion.....</b>	<b>24</b>
5.1 Learners' Self-Reported Speaking Anxiety Before and After a Game-Based Lesson.....	24
5.2 Manifested Opportunities for L2 Talk During the Game-Based Lesson.....	26
<b>6. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>7. References.....</b>	<b>29</b>

# 1. Introduction

There is a reported issue among elementary school learners and their English language skills, specifically regarding their lack of verbal participation during class. Several international studies have shown that some pupils completely avoid speaking English out loud because of the amount of fear and anxiety they have tied to their oral performance (Saha & Singh, 2021; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023). The experience of negative emotions regarding speaking one's second language can be defined as foreign language anxiety. Foreign language anxiety can, according to Gregersen & MacIntyre (2014), become a substantial hindrance in a pupil's second language development. Nilsson (2020) conducted a study in Sweden and found that about a fifth of elementary school learners experienced foreign language anxiety which caused them to not participate verbally.

A method for encouraging and activating learners regardless of their language level is, according to Plass et al. (2020), game-based learning as it combines social and cognitive elements to create a joyful learning environment. Research has shown how playing analog, educational games can strengthen learners' confidence regarding their speaking ability through collaborative and communicative tasks (Casanova-Mata, 2023; Saha & Singh, 2021; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023). This aligns with the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2022) as it underscores how learners should develop their linguistic abilities and self-confidence through teamwork, problem-solving and active discussions. However, seemingly few studies have researched if game-based learning could support verbal participation among elementary school learners experiencing foreign language anxiety, especially within Swedish schools.

Through a sociocultural lens, this study explores this gap in research. This was done by researching if an analog board game could create a supportive structure for anxious learners to participate verbally in one Swedish year 4 class. The findings aim to contribute examples of which supportive structures within game-based learning could be beneficial for teachers with learners who experience foreign language anxiety. Since about a fifth of elementary school learners in Sweden reportedly struggle with participating verbally due to anxiety (Nilsson, 2020), this study becomes arguably relevant for all foreign language teachers. The Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2022) states that all teachings should be inclusive of all learners, which requires teachers to explore methods to create a safe classroom environment that lets learners contribute on an equal basis.

## **1.1 Aim & Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore how an analog game influences year 4 pupils' participation in English oral interaction and their reported experiences of speaking and participating in a game during one English lesson in a Swedish elementary school. This includes one classroom observation, self-reported experiences from the pupils as well as the teacher's reflections. The aim is to research if analog game-based learning could possibly be used as a scaffolding tool when dealing with potential foreign language anxiety among young, Swedish, English foreign language learners.

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How does the game session relate to pupils' self-reported speaking anxiety during the lesson compared to before the lesson?

RQ2: How do pupils' opportunities to participate in L2 talk manifest during the game as described by the pupils?

## 2. Background

The following section provides a background to the research topic of game-based learning and foreign language anxiety in an elementary school context. First, key terms related to the research questions are defined and unpacked. Secondly, the theoretical lens is described. Thirdly, the rationale of this study is discussed in relation to the Swedish curriculum. Finally, this section ends with a brief discussion of previous research to contextualise this study.

### 2.1 Key Terms

#### 2.1.1 Game-Based Learning

Plass et al. (2020) describes *game-based learning* (henceforth GBL) as a didactical method focusing on combining game-based elements and language teaching in order to promote knowledge development among learners. The game can be analog or digital, however analog games are arguably more reliant on verbal communication between players than digital games according to the author. Plass et al. (2020) describes how games contain multiple beneficial elements for cognitive, social and linguistic development. A few examples are: problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork and communication skills. According to Plass et al. (2020) GBL can be used as a strategy to motivate learners to actively participate during lessons.

#### 2.1.2 Foreign Language Anxiety

*Foreign language anxiety* (henceforth FLA) is defined by Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) as “the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning and using a second language and is especially relevant in a classroom where self-expression takes place” (p. 3). The authors describe how this includes an apprehension of feeling embarrassed, anxious and/or incompetent when faced with the need to produce either written or oral assignments in a foreign language.

#### 2.1.3 First, Second and Foreign Language

First language (henceforth L1) and second language (henceforth L2) describes a person's relation to languages. L1 is usually the mother tongue, or otherwise the first language that a person learns. L2 is the second language that a person learns, and most Swedish people's L2 language is, according to Lundahl (2021), English. In addition to L1 and L2 there is English

as a foreign language (henceforth EFL). Lightbown and Spada (2013) explains how EFL refers to a country where English is not one of the primary languages. The authors highlight that a foreign language is often learned later in life in a structured setting, such as teaching. L2 could be one of multiple primary languages within a region as well as the second language a person acquires, but foreign language is never a region's primary language (Lundahl, 2021; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Within this study English is both a foreign and a second language for the participants and the terms L2 and EFL are therefore in this case interchangeable.

#### **2.1.4 Scaffolding**

Gibbons (2010) presents how *scaffolding* is a term for describing the 'right amount' of support for the learners from the teacher and/or learning materials. To scaffold learners means to temporarily give them the support that they need in order to continue developing their language skills. The author explains how learners' verbal participation can be scaffolded through using language in meaningful contexts, teamwork among pupils and challenging learners with language slightly above their current linguistic level. Gibbons (2010) describes how scaffolding is a branch from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978).

## **2.2 Learning Theories and the Swedish Curriculum**

### **2.2.1 Sociocultural Theory**

*Sociocultural theory* was introduced by Lev Vygotsky in 1978. Vygotsky believed that young learners best develop cognitive skills in structured social interactions. Using one's language is an important tool in a child's development as it gives them an opportunity to explore various ways of thinking and therefore learn with and from each other. Vygotsky (1978) described how a child's own culture shapes and develops their cognitive skills, and by communicating with others their horizons get broader. According to Säljö (2020) Vygotsky's main focus was for people to use language as a median tool to scaffold each other, regardless of language level.

William & Leahy (2015) present their own theories based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the authors have studied and found value within a modern-day communicative classroom. The authors heavily underscore the importance of learners actively communicating with each other independently from the teacher, and - in accordance with Vygotsky (1978) - found that

linguistically stronger and weaker pupils learn from and support each other. Similarly, Read (2007) has explored communicative and social games and its effect on developing and decoding language. The author presents several game-based elements and argues for their effectiveness when supporting young learners' verbal and social development. These include: modelling language, visual and textual support as well as collaborative work.

### **2.2.2 Zone of Proximal Development**

One key element of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) is the *Zone of Proximal Development* (henceforth ZPD). ZPD represents the optimal learning environment for knowledge development to occur. This includes setting the right environment for each learner with the right amount of support for a task not to feel too easy or too difficult to complete. Placing a learner in a social environment with other learners of various knowledge levels can create a setting where the pupils either learn from a more knowledgeable pupil or deepen their existing understanding by explaining and guiding less knowledgeable pupils (Lundahl, 2022).

### **2.2.3 The Swedish Curriculum**

There are three specific elements within the Swedish curriculum that connect to the aim of this study and the English classroom. The first one is that teaching should motivate and encourage learners to continue learning and gain more confidence. Secondly, pupils should experience working and solving problems in groups on an equal basis. Finally, all pupils should be prepared and ready for being an active part of today's society.

The fundamental values of the curriculum emphasises how teaching should be adapted to include all learners regardless of their needs (Skolverket, 2022). Skolverket (2022) writes how lessons should not just educate learners, they should also stimulate and motivate all pupils to continue learning - and for that to happen there needs to be variation in how subjects are being taught. Pupils should be encouraged to develop confidence in their speaking skills through discussions, critical-thinking and group work.

Teaching should let learners practise working together with others. One of the schools' missions (Skolverket, 2022) is teaching learners how to work in groups as it develops the pupils' social skills, gives them insight into other perspectives as well as developing their

communicative skills. The aspect of play is also a significant part of developing knowledge and can encourage active learning among pupils (Skolverket, 2022).

Another fundamental value, according to Skolverket (2022), is to teach learners how to become functional members of today's society, and that includes learning how to speak in English. The curriculum and syllabus for English motivate the importance of well-developed linguistic abilities in English because of how integrated the English language is in our everyday life. The gate-way into experiencing and becoming a part of international cultures, politics, studies and jobs is developing a well-rounded communicative ability in English (Skolverket, 2022).

## **2.3 Relevant Research**

This section will present current and relevant research in regards to the aim and research questions. Firstly, the text presents research regarding learners' reported issues with FLA and self-confidence and how that relates to speaking English. Finally, the studied effects of different versions of GBL will be presented in relation to pupils' oral participation.

### **2.3.1 FLA and Low Self-Confidence Among Elementary School Learners**

According to current research, there are multiple reported cases of anxiety and fear among young English foreign language learners regarding their oral participation in English. In most cases the researchers describe the observed participants as anxious, fearful and/or shy - some pupils even self-reported levels of strong FLA (Chao & Fan, 2020; Dewi et al., 2017; Nilsson, 2010; Saha & Singh, 2021). Within these studies, the basis of their FLA seems to be a fear of making a mistake regarding pronunciation, because it might make others laugh or perhaps make others think that you're less linguistically developed than they are, or less than you should be. Feeling anxious about the risk of being ridiculed or feeling embarrassed was, in some cases, preventing learners from participating verbally during their English lessons . A study by Nilsson (2010) concluded how about a fifth of all surveyed elementary school learners in Sweden suffers from FLA and does not verbally participate during class and therefore their speaking skill-level is far below the average.

There is evidence that shows that learners might be struggling with their self-confidence as a correlation to their FLA. The learners might not just fear making mistakes, but rather fear that

they are not linguistically capable enough to complete the assignment or add something valuable to the conversation (Dewi et al., 2017; Nilsson, 2010). The learners' self perception most often depends on their own language-level and vocabulary. However, in some cases the learners' reading, writing and listening abilities are great and yet they do not feel confident speaking English (Saha & Singh, 2021). Not feeling confident in one's own abilities might lead to less active oral engagement and participation during the lesson which could lead to even worse judgement on one's self (Nilsson, 2010; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023). Therefore, multiple researchers underscore the importance of finding scaffolding strategies for learners who feel anxious or struggle with self-confidence regarding verbal language participation (Chao & Fan, 2020; Dewi et al. 2017; Saha & Singh, 2021).

### **2.3.2 Different Versions of GBL Result in Different Outcomes**

Implementing GBL during lessons has the possibility to create a supportive, encouraging and communicative classroom environment. There are multiple types of games; collaborative, competitive, cooperative and so on - each different game set-up arguably yields different results for the learners (Qiao et al., 2024; Casanova-Mata, 2023). Although a competitive set-up seemed to create the best boost in over-all results, it actually became less encouraging for low-performing learners who stood little to no chance against the high-performing learners (Qiao et al., 2024). This instead created a problem regarding performance anxiety among learners which led to more of them staying quiet during the game (Casanova-Mata, 2023). On the other hand, collaborative and cooperative games seemed to verbally include all learners, regardless of language-level, because the competitive pressure was removed and the focus was now on solving tasks by working together or alongside each other (Qiao et al., 2024; Saha & Singh, 2021; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023). The learning environment seemed to allow more learners to speak out loud as they had a common goal and therefore paid less attention to their own individual performance (Casanova-Mata, 2023; Qiao et al., 2024; Saha & Singh, 2021; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023).

Research shows how most learners' oral participation increased during collaborative and/or cooperative games. When the learners became dependent on each other to participate during game-based lessons they started actively communicating with each other in a seemingly more comfortable and relaxed way (Casanova-Mata, 2023; Chao & Fan, 2020; Dewi et al. 2017; Saha & Singh, 2021; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023). As observed by the researchers or self-reported by the pupils, a majority, if not all the participants, became more motivated and

encouraged to verbally engage while they played analog board-games (Casanova-Mata; 2023; Dewi et al. 2017; Saha & Singh, 2021; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023; Qiao et al., 2024). In some cases the motivation among pupils increased when specifically playing a non-competitive game which reportedly made learning less stressful and more enjoyable in comparison to ordinary English lessons (Dewi et al., 2017; Qiao et al., 2024) In other cases, the supportive structure of GBL seemed to be the reason for active participation among learners. Providing visual aids, structured turn-taking and modelling sentence structures came across as essential parts of why learners gained the courage to increase their oral engagement (Casanova-Mata, 2023; Saha & Singh, 2021; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023).

A majority of the games researched were designed to be centered around communication and therefore included tasks to make the learners interact with the game and each other. Including elements such as turn-taking, communicative tasks and familiar topics seemed to make the game more supportive for linguistically weaker and/or quiet learners (Dewi et al., 2017; Saha & Singh, 2021; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023). Additional research presents how using a game structure that's already familiar with the learners could assist them as they play because it made the conditions more comfortable and therefore easier to participate in (Casanova-Mata, 2023). Providing learners with engaging material where the learners support and learn from each other, could be a way to scaffold them as they develop their linguistic abilities (Nilsson, 2020).

### 3. Method

This chapter describes the method and process that was conducted in order to answer the research questions. The main data source of the study is the pupils' self-reported feelings and experiences, and the observation and teacher interview are secondary sources. Since the aim is to gather data based on the participants' experiences and actions, a qualitative research approach was chosen as suitable. Qualitative research methods are, according to Christoffersen & Johannessen (2012) as well as Braun & Clark (2022), a suitable method for capturing more nuance to a specific issue. First, the context and participants are introduced. Secondly, the game is explained. Thirdly, the methods used for the interviews and the observation are described. Finally, the study's ethical considerations are highlighted.

#### 3.1 Context and Participants

The school is located in the south of Sweden and was chosen for two reasons. The first one being a convenience selection because I knew the participating teacher. However, I did not know the pupils participating in this study. They fulfilled the basic criteria of attending elementary school, having English as a subject and as a second language. Therefore the selection overall is a combination of convenience and criteria-based selection (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012). The second reason is that this school has documented high levels of school-related anxiety among years 4-9.

The participants consisted of one English teacher and 14 pupils from a class of 28 pupils in year 4. All learners who gave consent to participate were observed and 14 pupils also gave consent to be interviewed. The school is rather small and through years 4-6 there are only three English teachers, there the selection was based on who I had the most previous contact with. During the observation, one pupil was home sick and three chose to not participate at all during the lesson for various reasons unrelated to the study.

#### 3.2 The Game

The game is a modified version of 'Go fish' - usually played with a regular deck of cards, the players try to collect as many four of a kind as they can by asking each other for cards. In order to still scaffold language development during the game, the deck of cards will be replaced with a customised deck. Instead of the regular four suits, there will be eight families

in different categories; animals, breakfast foods, family members, outer space, ocean, nature, vegetables and on wheels. The categories were chosen with the teacher to make sure that the subjects were suitable and relevant for the learners. Each created card was designed with the subject written on the card alongside a clear picture of the item or person.

This game structure was chosen for three main reasons. Firstly, the original game is familiar to the learners and therefore less time would be spent explaining the game rather than playing it. Secondly, it makes learners dependent on verbally interacting with each other in order to keep playing. The game only requires three phrases to play: “Do you have a...”, “No, go fish” and “Yes”. Finally, the pupils play in groups and the game is turn-based. Meaning everyone gets a turn and therefore no learner can hide behind a group. This, however, could put more pressure on the individual although the playing field is leveled.

### **3.3 Materials/Instruments**

#### **3.3.1 Interviews**

There were pre- and post-lesson interviews with the pupils and one complementary post-lesson interview with the teacher. All interviews were conducted in-person. A qualitative, semi-structured method was used when asking questions because, according to Brinkkjær & Høyen (2021), it lets the participants answer freely and the interviewer to ask spontaneous follow-up questions. The authors highlight how this structure could aid the researcher in getting a deeper insight into each participant's experiences. Brinkkjær & Høyen (2021) highlight how in-person interviews provide an opportunity to gather data based on the participants' body language and their approach to the questions. However, one of the challenges with interviews is that the answers can not be generalised and applied to a larger group (Trost, 2010). This is to be considered since only half of the class were interviewed. All interviews were recorded on a separate dictaphone and were deleted after use.

The interviews with the pupils were conducted in small groups in order to create a comfortable environment. All questions were open ended in order to create a flow in the conversation. The learners talked freely and clarifying questions or follow-up questions were asked when necessary. If some pupils were nervous to answer they were reassured that they could take their time or didn't have to answer if they didn't want to. They were shown the dictaphone and knew they were being recorded. One thing taken into consideration was that

the learners might have been nervous and therefore not answered comfortably or edited their answers knowing that they were recorded (Alvehus, 2023) All group-interviews with the pupils were held in an empty classroom and took about 15 minutes each.

The post-interview with the English teacher was conducted face to face in private for about 20 minutes. The interview contained a mix of semi-structured and specific questions to make it easier for the teacher to share their own reflections and make sure they also provide context for the rest of the collected data. No precaution regarding nervousness was taken.

### **3.3.2 Observation**

A second qualitative method was chosen to complement the interviews - a classroom observation. The interviews alone do not portray the experience of the whole class (Trost, 2010), the intention of the observation was to try to create an understanding of to what extent the class participated verbally during the analog game based-lesson. The observation's purpose was to provide a general overview of all pupils as well as context for the learners' self-reported experiences. The fact that the pupils knew that they were being observed was taken into consideration as they might act differently knowing they're being watched (Alvehus, 2023; Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2012). Additionally, the researcher can only document visible actions and not the intention behind them which might lead to generalisations (Denscombe, 2017). The observation was only documented through hand-written field notes.

### **3.4 Procedure**

Two days before the observation, pre-interviews with the learners were conducted at the school in two groups of four. Here, the learners provided me with a baseline for how easy or difficult they found it to speak English out loud in class. Because of some learners forgetting their consent forms at home - another three pre-interviews (two groups of four and one group of two) were conducted on the same day as the observation, but before the lesson. After my questions each pupil was asked to rank how difficult it feels to speak English out loud in class on a scale of 1-10 (1 being the most difficult and 10 being extremely easy) and explain why. Each interview took about 15 minutes.

The class played the game in five groups with three to six learners in each group. The lesson included about 10 minutes of explaining the rules of the game and then just about 30 minutes

of playing. As the learners played 'Go Fish' I was a non-intrusive agent in the classroom as I quietly observed and took field notes. However, because the pupils quickly became loud I had to move around the room in order to observe all learners whom I had interviewed earlier. The engagement and L2 usage of the class as a whole was observed, but I had an extra focus on the 14 learners I had interviewed.

After the lesson, I post-interviewed the same 14 learners again in the same groups as before. These post-interviews followed the same structure as the pre-interviews, a discussion and then let the learners rank and motivate their own experience. Here, the interviews took about 10 minutes per group. Finally, I interviewed the teacher in-person for about 20 minutes. This interview focused on the teacher supplying context and background information to the already collected data as well as their own opinions of the lesson.

All interviews were conducted in Swedish, later transcribed in both Swedish and English. The quotes from the pupils were translated from Swedish to English by me.

### **3.5 Analysis**

A thematic analysis was chosen as a method for analysing the collected data because of its applicability to interpret and find patterns in qualitative data. Since the majority of the data in this study is qualitative and not quantitative, this method seemed fitting. Braun and Clark (2022) present six phases when examining data: 1) familiarisation, 2) coding, 3) generating initial themes, 4) developing and reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) writing the report. While using this method the six phases were combined into three: 1) getting familiar with and structuring the data 2) analysing patterns and themes 3) finding three main themes and writing the report.

The first phase was about becoming familiar with the collected data and starting to categorise and find meaning behind it. This was done by repeatedly listening to all interviews, as well as transcribing them in a Google document and typing up my hand-written field notes. This also included starting to summarise the data by identifying and extracting patterns in order to move on and generate the themes. For phase two, I read through my transcribed data and created a rough mind-map by shortening quotes, creating key words and trying to gather general patterns. I then re-did the mind-map, summarising the data even further and making it

more defined based on general themes. Finally, I colour-coded the mind-map based on which themes fit together and that left me with three main themes of analysis: Creating an encouraging classroom environment, Ways to scaffold verbal language usage, and Performing in groups. These three themes outline the results of this study.

Apart from the thematic analysis, the quantitative data from the learners' score-response was summarised separately. A low score on the scale (1-10) indicated a high level of anxiety/difficulty speaking English in class, a high score indicated a low level of anxiety/difficulty speaking English in class. In a Google document I created two columns, one called pre-lesson and the other called post-lesson. All learners and their pre- and post-scores were added. After that, the value and average score of each column was calculated. Pre-lesson: 64,5. Average value:  $\approx 4,6$ . Post-lesson: 117,7. Average value:  $\approx 8,4$ . Note that if a learner answered with two adjacent numbers, for example 3-4 - this was converted into a score of 3,5.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

In order to ensure this study's academic integrity and transparency, the ethical guidelines presented by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) were followed. Prior to conducting this study, all participants received and signed a consent form that described the study's methods and intention in detail. All participants were made aware on multiple occasions that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time and that their contributions and information then would be removed. The consent-forms covered the four main ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017): secrecy, professional secrecy, anonymity and confidentiality.

All sensitive data, such as names and ages of the participants, was stored on non-private devices. All participants were given neutral aliases in this study to comply with the secrecy requirement and protect the participants, as almost all of them are minors (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). In addition, no private information about the pupils, the teacher or the school was shared to anyone outside of this study as per the requirement of professional secrecy. In order to comply further with the ethics of the Swedish Research Council, all participants are anonymous and not mentioned by age, race, gender or any other personal descriptions. The same goes for the school, besides being located in the south of Sweden with high levels of

reported anxiety among pupils, there are no identifying features regarding location, its socio-economic index or amount of attending pupils. All of this is to remain confidential to protect the mental and social integrity of all participants since the nature of this study is to analyse and discuss the pupils' experience about their self-reported struggles with anxiety. (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

There is no recognised bias within this study or its collected data.

## 4. Results

This study's research questions aim to answer if the learners' self-reported anxiety levels, regarding speaking English out loud, were affected after conducting a game-based lesson. This is answered through the learners' own thoughts alongside the teacher's and my observation of the lesson and the class. The majority of the data is the pupils' own voices and opinions. This section will firstly be organised based around the three themes found through the thematic analysis. Finally, the quantitative data collected from the learners, their personal scores from 1-10, is presented.

### 4.1 Creating an Encouraging Classroom Environment

Even though the participating pupils described the regular classroom environment as friendly, 13 out of 14 pupils explained that they still felt nervous or anxious when speaking in front of the class, including presentations and answering questions. A majority of learners explained how they feel a deep fear of making mistakes regarding pronunciation or saying the wrong thing because of the risk that the rest of the class would laugh at them. One pupil (P-10) expressed that "When you pronounce something wrong you feel shame and think that everyone will laugh.". Some learners even expressed concern about being taunted throughout the school day, and beyond, for just saying something wrong.

Multiple reasons were expressed by the learners as to why they feel uncomfortable when speaking out loud in class. Often they are asked to speak with the rest of the class focusing on them, this leads to self-reported feelings of stage-fright, nervousness and not being comfortable. These feelings occurred both when the class was completely quiet, because the learners felt stared at, or when classmates did not pay attention to them which made them feel unimportant. Several learners explained in detail how they critically compare their own performance to others. Following is a quote from one of the learners (P-5) who expressed intense feelings about feeling anxious in regards to their own verbal participation:

I don't think I'm bad at English but it feels like if I am going to speak English I have to do it first. If we're reading a text I have to be the first one to do it because if someone else reads and they do it better than I thought I could - it gets like this oh no no no I don't want anymore, or I don't want to

do it. Then it would be even more of a disaster if I said something wrong because then everyone would look at me and be like: how can you not be as good as the person before you.

Several learners said that whenever someone else in class says “pass” to answering a question or reading out loud - a lot of pupils follow and also say “pass”. The teacher confirms that most pupils say “pass” whenever asked to speak and the turn instead goes to the pupils that feel comfortable and usually speak.

During the observation, the classroom became quite loud after a few minutes. A lot of seemingly positive laughter was heard as all learners, but three, actively participated in the game-based lesson. As I walked around I could hear a lot of L2 talk from the pupils as they asked for cards and collected sets. However, there was also a lot of L1 talk but outside of the game. A pupil could in some instances ask “Do you have a carrot?” to another player, but then say in Swedish “Asså jag kommer att vinna detta!” (“Oh I’m going to win this!”). This was the case for some, but not all learners. Note that all participants actively played the game and, more or less, used L2 talk for the majority of the lesson. The overall environment, according to my observation and the teacher’s reflection, was joyful and seemed to encourage learners to verbally participate. The teacher told me that this is the first time this class plays a game during an English lesson.

The learners also gave their insight into the ‘new’ classroom environment. They noticed how the environment became more loud than ordinary lessons. Some found the noise a bit annoying but the majority reported how noise made the environment more comfortable. According to the learners, having others speaking in the background put less focus on themselves and therefore they felt more comfortable speaking.

## **4.2 Ways to Scaffold Verbal Language Usage**

The learners described issues regarding their own language development that made them unsure and anxious speaking English. About half of the pupils reported how they don’t want to read out loud or answer questions in English due to a fear of being presented with words or a phrase that they don’t understand. It became a premature fear of sounding stupid or not responding correctly because of a lack of comprehension which led to them just staying quiet

instead. One of the pupils (P-7) said that “The brain is not made to speak English. I don’t like reading out loud because when I don’t understand a word, my brain shuts off completely and then I can’t speak English, barely.”

The pupils had insights into what structures and/or strategies that could make them more comfortable developing their speaking ability. All of them said that they felt more comfortable speaking English in smaller groups. A few learners further explained how they in smaller groups could help and support each other if they were to make a mistake while speaking. They also described how they felt like they could practice their verbal language skills in these groups and that might make it easier to speak in front of the class.

Three other possible support structures were mentioned by the pupils. The first one was visual support. A majority of the pupils explained how having a digital presentation or a physical poster when they have to present something helps because then they have something to refer to if they lose track of what they have to say. The second support structure is code-switching. A few pupils described an ease when they were allowed to code-switch because they wouldn’t ‘get stuck’ as easily. The teacher allows this but apparently other learners find it annoying. The third structure is progression. One learner specifically (P-8) explained how they felt like they actually would want to, specifically, read out loud more if they got to practice with easier texts first and then move on to more difficult ones. They said that “More difficult texts I don’t want to [read out loud] but easier texts I can try.”

After the game-based lesson almost all learners had thoughts about the structure. As perhaps suspected, they very much enjoyed playing in smaller groups and reported how it made them feel comfortable. That was also observed during the lesson and confirmed by the teacher’s own reflections. The design of the playing-cards and structure of the game was mentioned by multiple learners as helpful. They said they found it comforting to know what to say or ask for during the game because of its repetitiveness. Learners also mentioned how the images on the cards made it easier for them to understand the correlating word. A handful brought up how this game structure could be used with more difficult words which could make them more fluent readers and speakers. One pupil (P-3) said “But maybe some harder words next time so that when you read texts [out loud] and difficult words appear you know that you already know them.” Two more learners nodded and agreed with this statement.

When discussing the game design with the teacher, they underscored that there are multiple benefits to playing games in class. Regarding this lesson specifically, the teacher said that it seemed to create a supportive structure for the learners. Primarily because of the modelling-structure of knowing what questions to ask and what to answer, and also because of the familiar subjects of the cards as well as the correlating images. The teacher argued that most of the time the learners actually know more than they think and that analog games could be a suitable stepping stone for getting the learners to develop their courage to participate more verbally.

### **4.3 Performing in Groups**

The self-reported anxiety among the learners were in most cases based on a negative view of themselves. A majority of learners explained that they were very self-critical of their own performances and often felt that their speaking skills were not good enough for them to participate. As mentioned in the first theme - almost all learners felt a fear of making a linguistic mistake in front of the class. And, as mentioned in theme two, everyone said that they prefer to speak in smaller groups. Some learners said that 3-4 other pupils is optimal and others wanted to just work in pairs.

The group-sizes varied between 4-6 pupils in each group during the lesson. During the observation, everyone within each group seemed equally included. After the lesson, all learners shared that they felt comfortable playing in groups because it made the game itself more enjoyable. Most learners self-reported how they felt less nervous speaking as they played 'Go Fish' in groups because the rest of the group focused on the game and therefore wouldn't notice if they said something wrong or made a mistake regarding pronunciation. They reportedly felt safer to verbally participate because they were doing something together, even though they were playing against each other.

Some learners said that playing in groups made it easier to get into the game than if they had played the whole class. A large number of pupils stated that their fear of making mistakes was reduced when they played, largely because of everyone focusing on the game which lowered the pressure they would otherwise feel. One learner (P-13) said "It's easier to speak [English] when you're playing games because you're in smaller groups, and then there's not as many focusing on you, then you don't think about being afraid to say the wrong thing." All

pupils reported that they enjoyed playing an analog game in English. One learner (P-11) seemed to find the enjoyment of the game comforting as they stated that “When you’re playing you’re not as scared.” Some argued that because this was a fun activity it therefore made it easier to learn a lot more English rather than sitting quietly and just listening to the teacher.

#### 4.4 Results of the Collected Quantitative Data

Table 1 presents each interviewed pupil and their given score regarding speaking English out loud in class both before and after the game-based lesson.

**Table 1**

*Pupils’ self-reported scores regarding speaking English out loud in class.*

Pupils:	Pre-lesson	Post-lesson
P-1	2	9,7
P-2	7,5	10
P-3	5,5	10
P-4	5	5
P-5	4	8,5
P-6	3,5	7
P-7	4	10
P-8	5	5
P-9	6	6
P-10	3	7,5
P-11	2	10
P-12	3	9
P-13	4	10
P-14	10	10
Combined score:	64,5	117,7
Average score:	≈ 4,6	≈ 8,4

During the pre-interview they were asked: How difficult is it for you or how nervous do you feel, on a scale of one to ten, to speak English out loud in class? One being the most difficult and ten being extremely easy. During the post-interviews they were asked: How difficult did it feel or how nervous were you, on a scale of one to ten, speaking English when you played the game?

Out of 14 interviewed learners, everyone but one reported that they experience some nervousness, anxiety or fear when speaking English out loud in class. About  $\approx 93\%$ . 10 out of 14 learners increased their score after the game-based lesson. About  $\approx 71\%$ . The average anxiety-levels were reportedly reduced by 3,8 points after one game-based lesson. Four learners answered with the same number during both interviews, whereas one of them, P-14, could not have given a higher score. The average score was calculated by dividing the combined score with the amount of pupils.

## 5. Discussion

In the following chapter, the presented results of this study are discussed alongside previously mentioned research and theories as well as the Swedish curriculum. This chapter has been divided into two sections that encompasses this study's research questions: How does the game session relate to pupils' self-reported speaking anxiety during the lesson compared to before the lesson? and How do pupils' opportunities to participate in L2 talk manifest during the game as described by the pupils?

### **5.1 Learners' Self-Reported Speaking Anxiety Before and After a Game-Based Lesson**

The initial responses during the pre-interviews indicated that about 97% of participating learners experience moderate to extreme FLA regarding speaking English out loud in class. This specific term, FLA, was not used by the pupils nor the teacher but I draw the conclusion from comparing the pupils' reported feelings to Gregersen and MacIntyre's (2014) definition. The researcher's definition and the pupils' self expressed feelings have multiple overlaps. These pupils explicitly mention feelings of worry and fear when they have to express themselves verbally using their L2 language.

The reason for the pupils' anxieties seemed to stem from not feeling safe and supported in the classroom. For some learners the words 'catastrophe' and 'awful' were associated with their own lingual performances, and one even mentioned that they skip presentations, never speak out loud or raise their hand. This goes against the overall intentions of the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2022) as it emphasises how all learners need to be included in the classroom and find teaching motivating and stimulating. Because of this contradiction, Nilsson (2020) reflects on the importance of researching language anxiety among pupils as it becomes a growing issue and goes against the values of the Swedish school system.

A majority of the interviewed pupils expressed issues with their self-confidence regarding their English abilities although their teacher claims that all of them are most likely more capable and knowledgeable than they think. The pupils' insecurities seem to spread until almost no pupils want to participate anymore. Gibbons (2010) describes how insecure or less linguistically developed learners tend to focus on getting the structure of the language correct

instead of expressing themselves and because they get negative feedback, they are restrained from expressing themselves again. The learners in this study informed me about one or more incidents where a pupil has been laughed at (given negative feedback) when they have made a mistake regarding pronunciation. When the worst case scenario is that a mistake could lead to days worth of teasing and/or bullying from other classmates, it does not come as a surprise when they describe that environment as fearful. Gibbon's (2010) reasoning could explain why so many of the pupils deem themselves as "bad at English" or not assuming they possess good enough linguistic abilities to interact orally with others.

Perhaps the other classmates' reactions towards mistakes are based on their own insecurities and lack of courage. The base principle of sociocultural theory is that people's personal skills are not fixed but rather malleable through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Lundahl (2022) this includes the correlation between experience and emotion as it affects the learners' sense of agency in the classroom. As seen in previous studies (Nilsson, 2020; Saraiwang & Worawong, 2023) when learners start to develop a lack of agency there is a risk that they start to doubt themselves and not participate - and when they don't participate they don't develop their speaking ability and they feel even less comfortable participating and get stuck in this negative, self-critical spiral.

During the post-interviews, the learners' mentioned several factors as reasons why most of them felt more comfortable speaking and less anxious during the game. (The ones related to specific game-based tasks and structures are discussed underneath the next headline.) The main reason was playing in smaller groups. Working in groups is encompassed by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and it permeates the Swedish curriculum (2022) which repeatedly underscores that learners need to work together in order to develop social and cognitive skills. Most learners expressed how the group's focus on the game instead of them made it feel safer to make mistakes. Qiao et al. (2024), Casanova-Mata (2023) and Saraiwang & Worawong (2023) all noticed how the course of the game took priority for most learners and less focus was directed towards other individuals leading to more communication within the groups due to a decreased fear of criticism from other classmates.

The fact that this was the first time these 4th year pupils played a game during an English lesson could be a part of why they reportedly enjoyed it so much. However, both Plass et al. (2020) and Vygotsky's concept of ZPD (1978) heavily underscore that if a task is too difficult

or too easy, the learners will either feel unsuccessful and defeated or bored and uninterested. Plass et al. (2020) explains how GBL can create support for learners in an enjoyable environment, and a motivating environment leads to active learners. Because this lesson was reportedly very different from ordinary teaching it might have been perceived as a break and not ‘learning’. Dewi et al. (2017) and Qiao et al. (2024) both drew conclusions that games created a less stressful environment because the learners did not perceive it as teaching. The pupils’ previous concern about being laughed at reportedly decreased, even though there were tons of laughter in all groups during the lesson. This time the laughter in the classroom was seemingly not *at* someone, but rather from the enjoyment of the game.

## **5.2 Manifested Opportunities for L2 Talk During the Game-Based Lesson**

As discussed within the previous heading, it can be argued that the participating pupils are in need of properly structured support in order for them to increase their verbal participation and L2 language development. The pupils mentioned specific tasks and structures tied to the game that made it easier to increase their oral participation such as: turn-taking, helping each other, modelling as well as visual and written aids. As the teacher and I designed the game, all of these factors seemed necessary to implement and clearly the pupils noticed.

The pupils described the turn-taking aspect as helpful because it required participation from everyone. This was reported as a relief because of the ‘usual’ negative domino-effect that occurred when one pupil said “pass” and almost every one else followed. According to conclusions by Chao & Fan (2020), Saha & Singh (2021) and Casanova-Mata (2023), an incentive to communicate was created when the learners became dependent on each other in order to play a game. In contrast, Qiao et al. (2024) present results where learners in some cases get annoyed with less linguistically developed learners because they might be too slow or not understanding the game properly. This was a risk when implementing the game, luckily, that did not seem to be the case among the interviewed learners.

Most learners found the images on the playing provided helpful context, they explained how it made it easier to understand the meaning of the written word. Having to say words you are not familiar with was a source of fear for a handful of the participants and visual aid seemed to be an effective tool to combat that feeling. This is supported by Gibbons (2010) and Read (2007) who argue for the importance of having visual support for learners to help pupils

decode difficult words. Casanova-Mata (2023), Saha & Singh (2021) and Saraiwang & Worawong (2023) all had participants that explicitly found it easier to speak English when scaffolded with correlating pictures.

The learners also continuously helped each other during the duration of the game. Because of the repetitive nature of the game, less confident learners could listen to others and therefore know 'acceptable' ways of asking or answering questions. Modelling is underscored as an important scaffolding tool by both Read (2007) and Lundahl (2022) for all, but especially weaker learners. This also resonates with the base theory of Vygotsky's ZPD (1978), that pupils learn from each other even if they are linguistically on different levels. Vygotsky (1978) and Gibbons (2010) explain how learners naturally use each other as a scaffolding tool when communicating and working together. Additionally, Wiliam & Leahy (2015) highlight how an active communicative classroom narrows the gap between high- and low-performing pupils. I believe that because of this structure there was more L2 than L1 talk within the classroom than if the game had had more difficult instructions.

The pupils' scores from all interviews are arguably reflective of their given opinions. Table 1 shows how the average score almost doubled after the lesson - broadly implying that the learners felt twice as comfortable speaking during this lesson rather than ordinary lessons. However, this is a generalisation. Although zero of the participants gave a lower score after the lesson, there were four learners whose score did not change between the pre- and post-interview. One (P-14) found absolutely no issues regarding speaking English out loud so it was perhaps no surprise that their score did not change.

The other three however, either had continued scores of a 5 or a 6. Even though GBL, collaboration, communication, scaffolding and other studies present results and argue for a method's effectiveness - it is not a given guarantee that those methods will be helpful. A communicative, analog game did not seem to contain the support they needed to feel more comfortable speaking. It might be because this was an unfamiliar structure and needed to get used to it, or perhaps they don't enjoy playing games or the loudness that usually, and in this case, came with it.

## 6. Conclusion

The intention of this study was to explore if GBL could be used as a scaffolding tool for elementary school learners experiencing FLA or fear when speaking English by interviewing 14 pupils in one year 4 class and observing one game-based lesson. The collected data suggests that playing educational games, that are dependent on verbal interactions between pupils, can decrease the feeling of fear and anxiety among learners experiencing FLA. The multimodal game manifested several opportunities for using L2 talk as well as created a supportive, enjoyable and motivating environment for the participants.

A gap in previous research is a lack of Swedish (and even European) studies regarding GBL and FLA, especially from the pupils' perspective. Although limited, this study therefore provides a scope into seemingly unresearched territory. The reported findings are arguably relevant for all foreign language teachers, because this study presents a strategy that proved to be effective in encouraging linguistically anxious learners to verbally participate. In a Swedish context, it is also every teacher's responsibility to provide teaching that is inclusive, motivating and pushes learners to develop their confidence as well as linguistic skills.

This study's limitations are as follows. Although an entire class was observed and half of them were interviewed, the sample size is too small to make any broader generalisations. Arguably, the results could be applied to another class within the same school but in order to make general inferences to Swedish year 4 learners, the sample size needs to be bigger. This study was also conducted within a short timeframe, it does not provide recurring results over multiple lessons that would further validate the results.

I believe that future research could fill in gaps that have been left due to this study's limitations. There are a few different directions that would be interesting to research. The first being how big of an issue FLA actually is in Swedish middle schools. Doing extensive research on this would provide an overview of how many pupils actually struggle with FLA and create an incentive to do further research into possible causes. The other direction for future research is to continue to research analog GBL as a tool for combating fears and anxieties and do continuous experiments with the same pupils over a longer period of time. This could explore if GBL is effective when developing learners' foreign linguistic abilities and if it has any long-lasting effects on the learners motivation and verbal engagement.

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