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Why won't they speak English? An investigation into how young learners perceive and negotiate anxiety and autonomy in the EFL classroom

Dalia Elhawary and Eleanore Hargreaves

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Why won't they speak English?
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Dalia Elhawary and Eleanore Hargreaves

About the authors

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Abstract

This report draws on the framework of Self Determination Theory to investigate primary-school children's anxiety and autonomy/agency during lessons for speaking English. An intervention was carried out by introducing pairwork into the classes of 281 children in three government primary schools in Alexandria, Egypt. Their teachers were introduced to Self Determination Theory and supported to use pairwork for English speaking lessons. The aim was to help implement Self Determination Theory, potentially leading to improved English-speaking learning; and wellbeing. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through sentence starters [n=281 children], questionnaires [n=243 children], drawings [n= 107], and in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected pupils [18 children]. The research sought out students' suggestions on how to create enhanced opportunities for young learners to learn spoken English, with special focus on reducing anxiety and increasing autonomy/agency. Findings indicated that children's levels of anxiety when speaking English in class were substantial, especially girls'; and autonomy/agency was felt higher by boys. However, our own classroom observations and individual interviews reported limited levels of autonomy/agency in the classroom. We found a negative correlation between anxiety experienced; and a sense of agency/autonomy. Children who were most anxious felt reduced agency/autonomy, which made learning to speak English more difficult. However, children felt least anxious and most autonomous when doing pairwork (if it was well managed) in contrast to traditional learning methods. This report closes with some recommendations for teachers on how to practise speaking skills using pairwork, as well as suggestions for future research.

Lesson 2 and 3

Listen and read the story.

Today we are going on a treasure hunt. Look for the four clues to find the treasure.

Here's the first instruction. Remember your teacher!

There's the bench. And here's the clue.

It's in blue and in red. What letter is it?

Here's the clue behind the door.

It's in brown and in green. What letter is it?

Come on Emily. Read the instruction.

We and look under the bench. Let's go.

Blue has got an 'e' and red has got an 'e'. So it's 'e'. Now where?

Go to the house and look behind the door.

It's the letter 't'.

Here's the clue behind the door.

What's the next instruction?

Go and look in front of the fence.

It's on a tree. Where do we go next?

There's one in flower but two in green. What letter is it?

Go and look next to the statue.

We've got e, t, e, r.

I know! It's 'r'. The treasure's in the tree.

It's in frog and in rabbit. What letter is it?

It's the letter 'r'.

There's a message. Congratulations! Here are some sweets! But where are they?

Oh, no! Look! The squirrel's got the treasure!

There's the third clue.

There's one in flower but two in green. What letter is it?

Go and look next to the statue.

We've got e, t, e, r.

I know! It's 'r'. The treasure's in the tree.

It's in frog and in rabbit. What letter is it?

It's the letter 'r'.

There's a message. Congratulations! Here are some sweets! But where are they?

Oh, no! Look! The squirrel's got the treasure!

Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
Teaching and learning to speak in English.....	1
Foreign language classroom anxiety.....	2
Language learner autonomy.....	2
Relatedness and language learning.....	3
2. Research design.....	4
Research intervention.....	4
Data collection activities.....	5
Data collection instruments.....	6
a. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS).....	6
b. Perceived Autonomy Support (PAS).....	6
c. Autonomy Need Satisfaction (ANS).....	6
d. Semi-structured individual interviews.....	7
e. Sentence-starters.....	7
f. 'Anxiety-triggering classrooms' drawing activity.....	7
3. Data analysis.....	8
a. Analysis of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS).....	8
b. Analysis of the Perceived Autonomy Support scale.....	8
c. Analysis of the Autonomy Need Satisfaction scale.....	9
d. Analysis of children's verbal and visual narratives.....	9
4. Findings.....	10
i Findings from the quantitative data.....	10
a. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS).....	10
Differences in classroom anxiety between girls and boys.....	11
b. The Perceived Autonomy Support scale (PAS).....	12
Differences in perceived autonomy support between girls and boys.....	13
c. The Autonomy Need Satisfaction scale (ANS).....	14
d. Correlational analysis.....	15
ii Findings from the qualitative data.....	15
a. Triggers for and descriptions of anxiety.....	15
b. Enhancers and descriptions of autonomy.....	18
5. Discussion.....	20
a. Foreign language anxiety in the classroom.....	20
b. Autonomy support and Autonomy Need Satisfaction in the classroom.....	21
c. Boys' and girls' differences in relation to anxiety and autonomy in the EFL classroom.....	21
6. Implications for practice and research.....	22
a. Recommendations for practice.....	22
b. Recommendations for future research.....	23
References.....	24



1

Introduction

As language researchers and educators, we all work hard to find ways to support pupils' learning and development. Often, we investigate the impact of using different teaching methods, curricula or technologies and we may overlook the learners themselves and what they can teach us about how to enhance their language learning experiences.

As in many low/middle-income countries, primary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Egypt tend to be over-crowded and under-resourced. Teacher-centred classes, grammar-translation methods and teaching to the test are common practices in these classes with very little, if any, differentiation work; which ultimately leads these classes to lack features considered necessary for effective language learning (e.g., Alderson, 2005; Dörnyei, 2009; Ortega, 2009; Watanabe & Swain, 2008).

There have been repeated reports in Egypt pointing to primary-aged learners' failure to develop the necessary interactional foreign language skills they need to function on both the global and national levels (see Hanushek, 2008; McCloskey, Orr, Dolitsky, 2006; ECD/World Bank Review Team, 2014). In 2017, Hargreaves, Elhawary and Mahgoub investigated the views of 393 Egyptian pupils about learning EFL in the primary classroom. These pupils provided an insightful analysis of their experience of learning English and how to improve it (Hargreaves et al, 2018; 2020).

The pupils identified the development of spoken language skills as their main aspiration for learning English; and affirmed that memorising grammar rules and lists of vocabulary did not satisfy meaningful or relevant learning goals for them. They expressed awareness that developing interactional language skills was their means to connect with the wider world and flourish as individuals and as a nation in the new millennium. Furthermore, they suggested that interaction among pupils, and between teachers and pupils, and capitalising on learners' agency and active engagement, could enhance their learning experiences.

Developing spoken interactional language skills is a particularly steep challenge. More than with other language skills, there are specific socio-cultural and affective factors beyond linguistic and cognitive ones that impact on learners' ability to speak and interact in English in the classroom (Shvidko et al, 2015). Our current research investigates the varying factors, in relation to foreign language speaking anxiety and learner autonomy, that facilitate or hinder pupils' learning to speak English inside the classroom. It provides vivid accounts from pupils themselves about variables related to classroom environments that support or hinder the development of spoken language skills. It therefore emphasises the views of the pupils on how to support and encourage speaking English as its main evidence-source.

Teaching and learning to speak in English

Some of the research on second language acquisition (SLA) provides helpful frameworks for understanding how children learn a foreign or second language. It suggests that, in the language classroom, young learners need to develop their own, internal hypotheses about language systems, in order then to take initiatives within language usage. As proposed by Vygotsky (1978), when learners are attentive to spoken language input, then it can become part of their language output. However, it is only through meaningful interaction whereby learners use the language to communicate messages, negotiate meaning and receive feedback on their use of the language in real-life contexts that they can test and verify the hypotheses they have developed about its systems. The research therefore suggests that learners themselves can contribute to language input and output when they engage in meaningful interactional activities with their peers (see for example, Allwright, 1984; Ellis, 1997; Gass, 2013 & Swain, 1995).

In a recent study conducted to understand the difficulties EFL teachers of young learners face when they teach EFL, teachers suggested that they find teaching speaking the most challenging aspect of their role (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014). Young learners tend to find it threatening to speak in front of their classmates, and teachers feel reluctant to promote spoken work in their classes when they themselves have low proficiency levels or lack of confidence in relation to listening and speaking (see e.g., Ahn, 2011; Ghatage, 2009 & Littlewood, 2007). While teachers' language proficiency level is important, other linguistic and non-linguistic factors could impede pupils' speaking of English, such as limits to children's opportunities to take risks in class (Gan, 2012; Littlewood, 2007; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

In particular, classroom environments that do not value pupils' participation and collaborative work may not provide conditions for developing spoken interactional skills. The use of pair and groupwork, then, can contribute to language development and interactional spoken competencies because it allows young learners space to practise and experiment with language, in a relatively low anxiety setting. Pair and groupwork provides peer scaffolding and support especially for struggling learners and those who may lack the necessary language competencies or self-confidence to speak English in front of the whole class (see for e.g., Ohta, 1995; Storch, 2002 & 2005 & Swain, 1995; Hargreaves et al, 2020).

Foreign language classroom anxiety

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope conceptualized foreign language classroom anxiety as 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process' (1986, p.128). Students who experience high levels of foreign language classroom anxiety may engage in negative self-talk about their poor language performance and competencies (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 1999), which creates affective barriers that inhibit access to language input and the competence to process information (Krashen, 1981 & 1982).

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation by teachers and/or peers, and test anxiety act together to comprise foreign language classroom anxiety. When students dread interacting with others in the foreign language, believe that their teachers and/or peers see them as less competent, and fear making mistakes, they tend to avoid or withdraw from participating in classroom activities and therefore have fewer opportunities for learning (Aida, 1994).

Several studies have concluded that language anxiety and language learning are negatively correlated (Aida, 1994; Chen & Chang, 2004; Elkhafaifi, 2005; MacIntyre, & Gardner, 1994; Sellers, 2000; Zhao, Guo & Dynia, 2013).

Language learner autonomy

Ryan and Deci (2019) claimed that Self Determination Theory (SDT) coordinated 'evolutionary, biological, and sociocultural insights within its psychological framework' (113). They highlighted evidence for the critical role of supports for Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness (CAR) in human development and creative learning, including the processes necessary for initiating speaking in a foreign language. SDT has been applied to and extensively researched in education and proposes 'the importance of autonomous motivation for students' quality of learning and engagement' (Ryan and Deci 2019, 138). In our research, we focused primarily on the autonomy aspect of SDT, because we perceived it to be very limited in this context. We explored the relationship between children's perceived autonomy (reflecting their agency) and their experiences of learning to *speak* English through pairwork, in contrast to learning English through their regular whole-class practices. Ryan and Deci suggested that 'well-studied interventions' regarding agency and education, such as the one reported in this paper, have been scarce (ibid.)

By autonomy, Ryan and Deci (2019) mean 'a wholehearted willingness to act' (ibid, 132) and 'willingness, empowerment and volition' (ibid, 123). Agency, as reflected in autonomy (and used interchangeably with autonomy for the remainder of this report), was described by Helwig (2006) as an essential aspect of the human propensity for curiosity and creativity. Manakiya and Wyse defined it as 'the capacity to act independently and to make one's own choices' (2018, 223). Helwig (2006, 466) also posited that constraints to agency can lead to a dampening of the child's curiosity, creativity and overall well-being. We suggest that these negative psychological effects may be particularly acute in relation to the learning of *speaking* a foreign language, since this demands curiosity and creativity in a way that other areas of the curriculum may not.

According to SDT, autonomy is inextricably connected to both competence (ie in our case, a sense that one is good at speaking English) and a feeling of belonging (in this case, to one's pair or class). If these three needs are met, according to SDT, intrinsic motivation leads to the boosting of creative learning. Competence and autonomy are connected, in that one's competence becomes

more evident and may be actually enhanced when autonomy operates. The authors also suggest that relatedness and autonomy are highly correlated and that they 'co-occur in the best of social contexts and close relationships' (Ryan and Deci 2019, 131). Ryan and Deci explained that highest quality dyadic relationships entail mutuality of autonomy (ibid, 114), in other words, the two partners in a pair of novice English speakers both need to sense their autonomy – as well as to experience competence and relatedness.

Proponents of SDT argue that its three basic psychological needs are relevant across all cultures. Helwig (2006) described how similarities relating to the three needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness were being recognised and explored across diverse cultures. Many studies associated with SDT have provided evidence that agency is needed for some aspects of productive learning in many different cultures (Jang, Kim and Reeve 2012; Niemiec and Ryan 2009). We were interested to see whether or how this would be manifested within the Egyptian EFL-speaking classroom and what role it played in encouraging learning to speak English.

Relatedness and language learning

While we also recognise the importance of children's relatedness during language learning, this article does not explore this element except in passing. However, we do note that the situation in the classrooms described here may differ from those in other countries where no corporal punishment or bullying is tolerated. In Egypt, corporal punishment was outlawed, but has not been fully eliminated. This appeared to make relatedness between pupils and teachers, and among pupils themselves, more problematic. Ryan and Deci (2019), emphasised how volitional, supportive relationships are essential for high-quality performance; and they also stress that this relatedness must be accompanied by autonomy.

2

Research design

Our research aimed to investigate the factors that encouraged or discouraged young learners' learning of spoken English inside the classroom. The study used a research intervention and was carried out in three government primary schools in Alexandria, Egypt that serve disadvantaged children. We collected quantitative and qualitative data through sentence starters [n=281 children], questionnaires [n=243 children], drawings [n=107], and in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected pupils [18 children]. The research sought out students' suggestions on how to create enhanced opportunities for young learners to learn spoken English. The research aimed to investigate the following main questions:

In relation to anxiety and autonomy, how do primary pupils experience learning to speak English during classroom pairwork activities? What suggestions do these pupils have for improving their experience of learning to speak English?

Research intervention

In September 2019, local authorities in Alexandria selected three government schools to take part in this research project. The schools were in three different locations across Alexandria, and they were chosen on the basis of convenience and willingness to participate. At the beginning of October 2019, the project commenced with a two-day training conference which was attended by seven Year 4 English teachers [of pupils aged 9 years old] and one Year 5 teacher [of pupils aged 10 years old] and one Year 3 teacher [of pupils aged 8 years old].

The training conference aimed to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills they needed to integrate speaking activities into their daily teaching in a way that maximised speaking time for all children and allowed for both peers' and the teacher's support. The teacher participants at the conference were introduced to the key principles of Self Determination Theory (Niemi & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2019 – see above), followed

by hands-on teaching and learning strategies that supported learners' sense of Competence, Agency and Relatedness (CAR) in the English classroom. Teachers were, particularly, guided on how they could use CAR principles to plan and implement pairwork speaking activities using the coursebooks they already had at school. The final part of the training included micro-teaching in which each teacher led a lesson including pairwork, under observation by the rest of the teachers and the two researchers. Through these means, the researchers were reassured that the teachers had grasped the concepts of the importance of competence, agency and relatedness in the teaching of speaking.

The nine teachers each then attempted to apply pairwork in their classrooms. The authors observed their teaching and provided feedback. The teachers based the pairwork on written dialogues in their textbooks; but also built in opportunities for the children to extend and/or adapt these. They instructed the class to work in pairs and practise the dialogue. Each teacher was observed at least twice during the first academic semester (October-December). The classroom observations were planned within the structure of a pre- and post-observation meeting. During the pre-observation meeting, the researchers met with each teacher in private and discussed lesson plans and how CAR underpinned their activities, and shared suggestions for implementation. The post-observation meeting engaged teachers in reflecting individually – with the authors – on the teaching and learning experiences in their classes. During the post-observation meeting, they were encouraged to experiment with different approaches of how pairwork could better support pupils' spoken English skills.

Between observations, the teachers were encouraged to keep records of and reflect on how pupils responded to CAR activities and how the children's participation changed over time. The researchers and teachers set up a WhatsApp group for sharing ideas and good practices and to support each other. The classroom observations were

planned to continue until the end of the second academic term (February-May 2020). However, all project activities had to end abruptly in March as protective measures against the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic were put in place, and schools were closed.

Data collection activities

During October and November 2019, the researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews with selected pupils (n=18) about how they experienced learning to speak English during CAR pairwork activities in the classroom. These children were identified by their teachers as normally attaining the lowest grades in English; and therefore, were hypothesised by the researchers to be experiencing the highest levels of anxiety and feeling the least autonomous. It was assumed that they represented a group of learners who were the most vulnerable in class and who could benefit the most from the current study intervention. It was therefore critical to hear their voices and understand how they experienced anxiety and autonomy during classroom pairwork speaking activities.

By the end of November, these 18 children and all the other pupils in the nine participant classes (N=281) responded to open-ended sentence starters that sought their opinions about how they experienced learning to speak English while their teachers implemented pairwork CAR activities.

During February, 243 of the whole set of pupils responded to a 4-point scale closed questionnaire that aimed to assess their classroom experience of a) speaking anxiety, b) autonomy support and c) autonomy satisfaction. Only 243 of the whole sample of 281 pupils were available to complete the questionnaire, as some children withdrew early from school because of threats of Covid-19 in spring 2020.

Following the questionnaire, the pupils were asked to sketch a picture of a situation that made them feel anxious during classroom pairwork activities. However, some pupils refrained from drawing and preferred only to respond to the written aspects of the questionnaire. The total number of pupils who drew anxiety-triggering classroom situations was 162, some of which were excluded as they were not clear or did not illustrate classroom situations. Thus, the number of drawings available for analysis was 107.

Table one below gives details about the actual number of pupils who participated in each data collection activity.

Seven Year 4 classes, one Year 5 class and one Year 3 class across three primary schools participated in this study. These schools were all under-resourced and served mostly children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The children's ages ranged from 8–10 years old. They had all studied English since Year 1.

Table 1. Number of pupils who participated in the different data collection activities

Total number of pupils	Interviews	Sentence starters	Questionnaires	Drawings
Boys	8	100	107	45
Girls	10	181	136	62
Total	18	281	243	107

Data collection instruments

a. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

The current study used Nilsson's (2019) adapted short version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) to assess how young learners experienced speaking English in the classroom in relation to anxiety. The short version of the FLCAS used by Nilsson (2019) had seven items that targeted assessing foreign language anxiety of young learners during oral interactions in class. To ensure that the FLCAS targeted the actual experiences of the young learners in this study, the research team modified some items, and replaced one item. All statements were worded affirmatively and were presented in the learners' first language (Arabic). The questionnaire scale was adapted so that participants responded to each questionnaire item using a 4-point scale that ranged from 4 (always) to 1 (never) instead of the original seven-point scale. The questionnaire included the following seven items, to which the children responded with a rating of 1, 2, 3 or 4:

1. I am afraid of making mistakes *when I speak in English (instead of the original 'I am afraid of making mistakes in English')*.
2. It makes me nervous when I do not understand everything the teacher says in English.
3. It feels ok to speak English *in pairs (small groups in the original was deleted to focus only on pairwork)*.
4. I always feel that my classmates are better at English than me *(this new item replaced the original, 'I feel more nervous during English lessons than while working with other school subjects' as the current study did not target comparing English with other school subjects)*.
5. I gladly volunteer to answer questions in English.
6. I'm afraid the others will laugh or tease me when I speak English *(the word 'laugh' was used instead of 'giggle' in the original scale)*.
7. I feel nervous if I am asked to speak in English without having prepared or practised first.

b. Perceived Autonomy Support (PAS)

Perceived autonomy support was measured using six items adapted from the short version of the Learning Climate Questionnaire (LCQ; Williams & Deci, 1996) which has been used widely in classroom settings to investigate students' perceptions of teacher-provided autonomy support (Black & Deci, 2000; Jang et al., 2012).

The LCQ was adapted so that participants responded to each questionnaire item using a 4-point scale that ranged from 4 (always) to 1 (never) instead of the original seven-point scale. It was translated into the participants' mother tongue to eliminate any possible constraints to understanding that might be caused by participants' limited competence in English. The LCQ included the following items:

1. My English teacher provides choices and options.
2. My English teacher understands what I need.
3. My English teacher believes that I will do well.
4. My English teacher wants me to ask questions.
5. My English teacher listens to me.
6. My English teacher sees my point of view.

c. Autonomy Need Satisfaction (ANS)

Autonomy need satisfaction was measured using the Perceived Autonomy subscale from the Activity-Feelings States Scale (AFS, Reeve & Sickenius, 1994, cited in Jang et al., 2012). The subscale was adapted to the same 4-point scale as the LCQ and translated into Arabic. The three items included:

1. In my English lessons, I feel free.
2. In my English lessons, I do things I like doing.
3. In my English lessons, I can decide for myself what to do.

d. Semi-structured individual interviews

Interviews were conducted in the children's native language (Arabic) in a private room and lasted 30–50 minutes. They were audio-recorded using a dedicated, password protected device and transcribed. Transcriptions were cross-checked with another native speaker of Arabic. A short game was also played during the interview in which children had to place a sentence written on card under an *agree* or *disagree* categorisation. The sentences explored beliefs about how children become proficient in language learning.

During interview, the child was invited to reflect on how the pairwork they had experienced supported them to learn to speak English; and how using pairwork was different from the use of normal [grammar/translation] pedagogic methods. We asked:

- a. What did you think of the lesson we observed?
- b. How was it different from normal?
- c. What was better/worse about the new-style lesson?
- d. Which style lets children participate/feel at ease more and why?
- e. How did you feel about having to actually speak?

e. Sentence-starters

The following Sentence-starters (SS) were presented in print on a sheet of paper to all children, written in their native Arabic, and checked for accuracy with a second native-speaker. Using SS as a means for collecting data from children is a technique that we have developed ourselves and have found highly productive in different contexts. The open-ended nature of each question ensured that all the SS data could be analysed inductively, to meet our purposes of investigating children's diverse experiences and perspectives. The SS included:

1. When we do English speaking in class, I like it best when we...
2. Speaking English in class is difficult when...
3. What I can do to help me to speak English better in class is ...
4. What the teacher can do in class to help me speak English in class is ...
5. When I am told to talk in pairs during English lessons, it makes me ...

The researchers read through each SS out-loud with the whole class, one SS at a time, making sure that every child understood, but without giving clues or examples. We emphasised that there was no right answer and that we wanted their honest thoughts.

f. 'Anxiety-triggering classrooms' drawing activity

The children were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Have you ever felt afraid or embarrassed during pairwork? What examples do you have?

Draw the pairwork classroom where you felt most afraid or embarrassed.

Label the picture to explain what is happening to you. [Where are you? Who else is there? What are they doing?]

3

Data analysis

In our effort to achieve the fullest picture possible to inform improvements for future learners and teachers, we aimed to explore the perceptions of the participants from different and complementary qualitative and quantitative data sources. This way, we sought a sophisticated and multi-dimensional understanding of relevant factors that impacted on children's experience of learning to speak English during classroom pairwork activities.

a. Analysis of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

Quantitative data were analysed in R v3.5.2 using RStudio v1.1463.¹ There were 243 children who completed the FLCAS items. There were no missing data for these individuals. However, a further 38 children participating in the study did not complete the survey items, as they did not attend school on the day the questionnaire was administered. This gave a completion rate of 86.5%. These 38 children are excluded from the following analysis.

Each answer to the FLCAS' seven items was coded 1 (never) to 4 (always). The coding for two items referring to positive feelings (items 3 and 5 above) was reversed. An overall score for the FLCAS was calculated by summing the scores for all seven items. This resulted in a FLCAS score ranging from 7 (indicating low anxiety) to 28 (indicating high anxiety).

The scale data were checked for reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .63, which is acceptable although relatively low). Descriptive statistics were calculated for the FLCAS scale data, for the whole group and for boys and girls separately. A t-test was used to explore group differences between boys and girls.

b. Analysis of the Perceived Autonomy Support scale

There were 243 children who completed the PAS items. There were no missing data for these individuals. However, as with the FLCAS scale, a further 38 children who were previously participating in the study did not complete the survey items as they were absent from school. This gave a completion rate of 86.5%. These 38 children are excluded from the following analysis.

Each answer to the PAS's six items was coded from 1 (never) to 4 (always), the total possible score therefore ranging from 6 (indicating minimum perceived support for pupil autonomy) to 24 (indicating the maximum perceived support for pupil autonomy).

The scale data were checked for reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .47, which is however below the level considered to be satisfactory so should be considered with caution and not taken as definitive). Descriptive statistics were calculated for the PAS scale data, for the whole group and for boys and girls separately. A t-test was used to explore group differences between boys and girls.

¹R is a programming language and free software environment for statistical computing and graphics supported by the R Foundation for Statistical Computing. R Core Team (2020). R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. URL <https://www.R-project.org/>

c. Analysis of the Autonomy Need Satisfaction scale

There were 243 children who completed the ANS items. There were no missing data for these individuals. However, as with the FLCAS and PAS scales, a further 38 children participating in the study did not complete the survey items as they were absent from school. This gave a completion rate of 86.5%. These 38 children are excluded from the following analysis.

Each answer to the ANS's three items was coded from 1 (never) to 4 (always), the total possible score therefore ranging from 3 (indicating minimum to almost no autonomy-need-satisfaction) to 12 (indicating the maximum perceived autonomy-need-satisfaction).

The scale data were checked for reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .71, which is satisfactory). Descriptive statistics were calculated for the ANS scale data, for the whole group and for boys and girls separately. A t-test was used to explore group differences between boys and girls.

d. Analysis of children's verbal and visual narratives

The qualitative data were comprised of the children's verbal and visual narratives and included data from the 18 transcribed semi-structured interviews, 281 written responses to SS, and 107 drawings. The research team used NVivo12 to code emerging themes from pupils' verbal and visual narratives, without imposing any pre-set themes.

We approached all responses from an interpretivist perspective (Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba 2007). The 18 interview transcripts, 281 Sentence-Starter transcripts, and 107 drawings were analysed inductively, letting codes emerge from the data (Elliot 2018; Hodgkinson 2016). That is, we were most interested in the sense-making process of each child rather than the number of particular responses. We looked for patterns, but we also sought to ascertain how the children each individually experienced anxiety and autonomy in their classrooms.

4

Findings

This section presents findings from analysing the i) quantitative and ii) qualitative data.

4.1. Findings from the quantitative data

a. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

Descriptive statistics for the FLCAS are summarised in table 2. The mean score on the FLCAS was 15.2 with standard deviation 4.4. The distribution of scores is illustrated in the box plot in Figure 1. As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of the respondents reported experiencing moderate levels of anxiety.

Mean scores were also calculated separately for girls and for boys. The mean score for girls on the FLCAS was 15.7 (SD = 4.6), slightly higher than for boys (mean = 14.6, SD = 4.1). Welch's t-test was

conducted, finding this difference was statistically significant ($t = 1.96$, $df = 237.2$, $p = .05$), suggesting that boys were less anxious than girls about speaking English. Girls' and boys' scores are illustrated in the box plots in Figure 2.

Table 2. Summary of FLCAS scores.

Group	N	Mean	SD
Girls	136	15.7	4.6
Boys	107	14.6	4.1
All	243	15.2	4.4

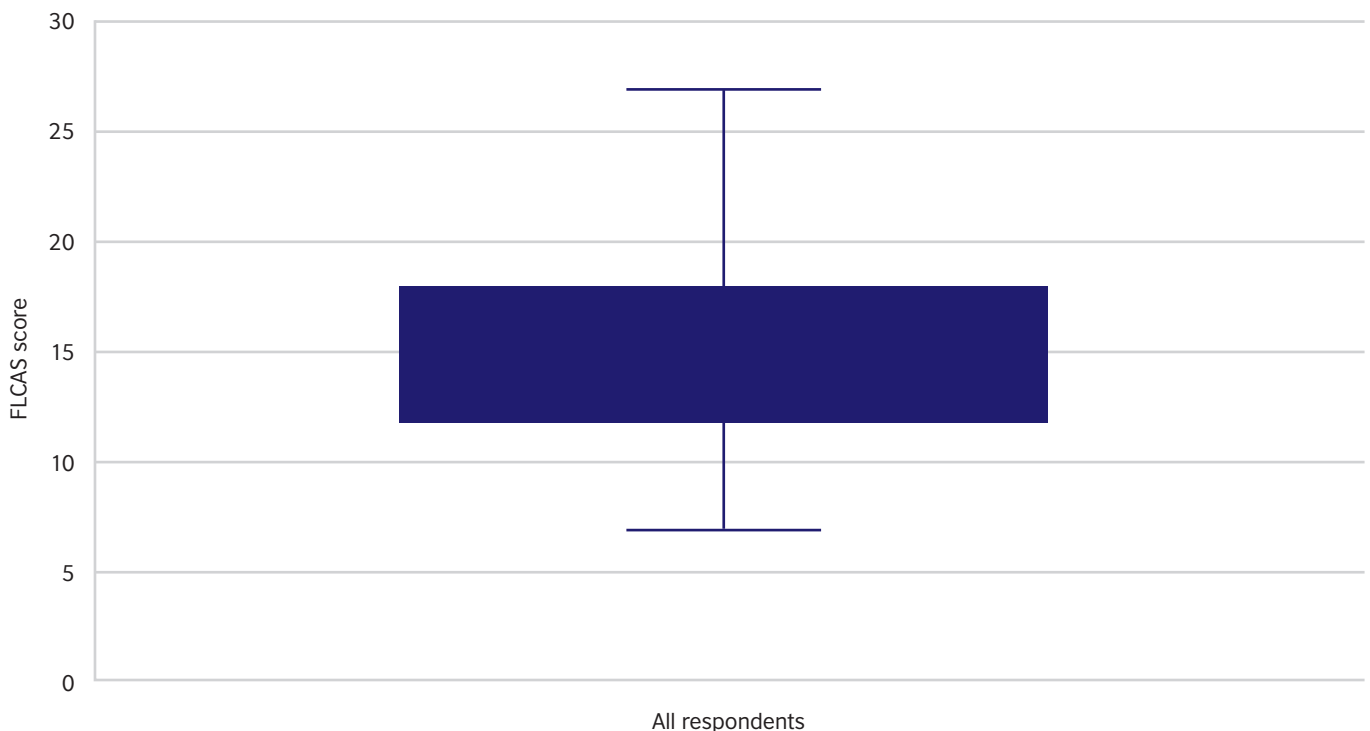


Figure 1. FLCAS scores, all respondents.

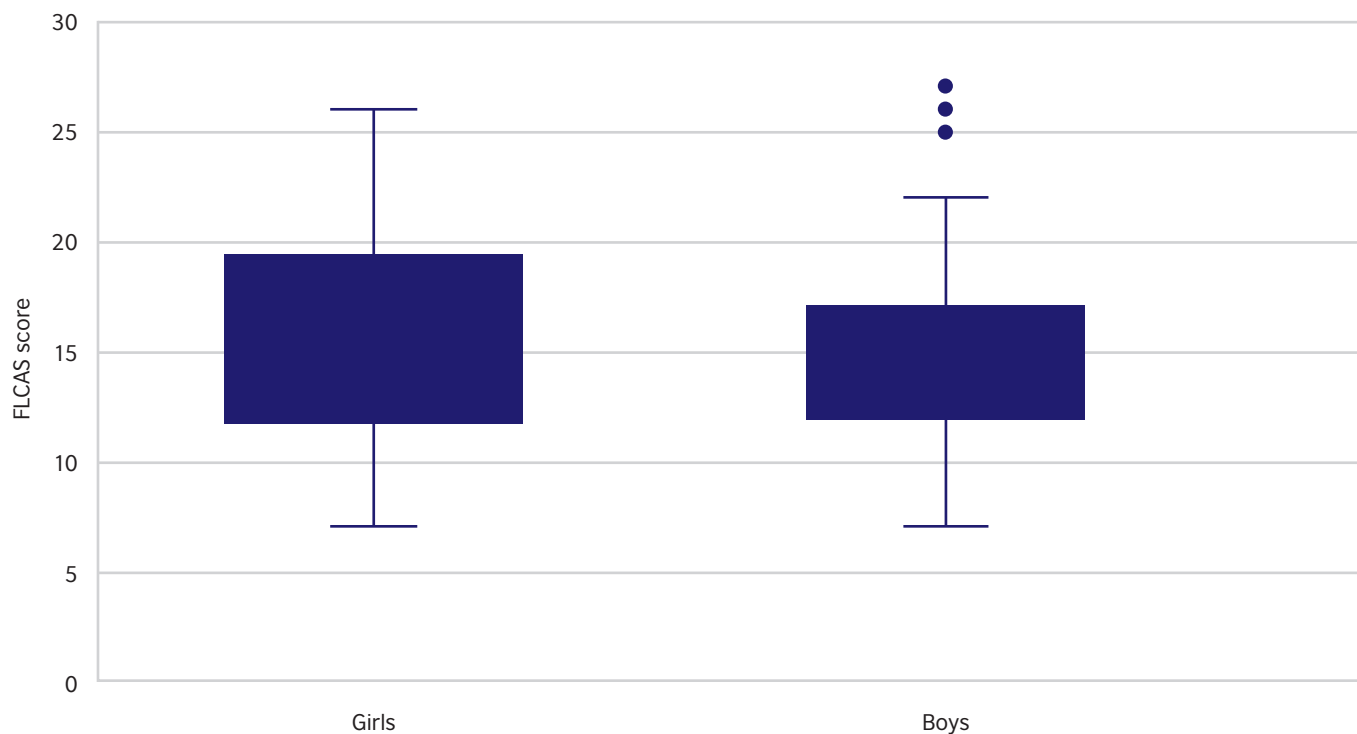


Figure 2. FLCAS scores by gender.

Differences in classroom anxiety between girls and boys

Given the focus of the present study on pairwork and specific classroom practices, it was of interest how boys and girls differed on individual question responses. To investigate this, Welch's t-test was conducted to compare group means for girls and boys for each item in the FLCAS. Results are summarised in table 3. Statistically significant differences were found for two items: I am afraid of making mistakes when I speak in English ($t=2.27$, $df=230.4$, $p=.02$) and I'm afraid the others will laugh or tease me when I speak English ($t=3.20$, $df=236.5$, $p<.01$).

In both cases girls experienced anxiety more frequently than did boys. This finding suggested that the teachers' attitude towards making mistakes and/or how they approached error correction in class acted as a possible trigger of anxiety, especially among girls. It could be that, directly or indirectly, teachers valued accuracy over fluency and encouraged correct answers rather than experimentation with the language and its use to communicate and negotiate meaning and that girls picked up on this message especially.

This finding also suggested that girls in particular felt more vulnerable to peer pressure as indicated by their fear of peer ridicule when speaking English in class. It is also interesting to note that the item 'it feels ok to speak English in pairs' has the least anxious responses from girls and boys. This strongly suggested that pairwork could support learning to speak in English with minimal anxiety and provide young learners with an enjoyable and beneficial learning experience. Looking at this item about pairwork and the item about fear of peer ridicule also suggests that peer support is an essential condition for making pairwork successful (which was mentioned by the children in response to the sentence starters: see below).

Table 3. Comparison of girls' and boys' responses to FLCAS items. Items in italics were reverse coded. Asterisks denote statistically significant differences in responses between girls and boys.

Item	Girls	Boys	t	Df	p
I am afraid of making mistakes when I speak in English.	2.64	2.28	2.27	230.4	.02*
It makes me nervous when I do not understand everything the teacher says in English.	2.66	2.54	0.84	238.7	.40
It feels ok to speak English in pairs.	1.39	1.36	0.25	226.0	.80
I always feel that my classmates are better at English than me.	2.26	2.13	0.90	231.7	.37
I gladly volunteer to answer questions in English.	1.72	1.95	-1.63	218.9	.11
I'm afraid the others will laugh or tease me when I speak English.	2.32	1.82	3.20	236.5	.00*
I feel nervous if I am asked to speak in English without having prepared or practised first.	2.66	2.47	1.28	229.4	.20

b. The Perceived Autonomy Support scale (PAS)

Descriptive statistics for the PAS are summarised in table 4. The mean score on the PAS was 17.1 with standard deviation 4.30. The distribution of scores is illustrated in the box plot in Figure 3. The box plot suggests that children's responses were slightly skewed towards agreeing that their autonomy was supported.

Mean scores were also calculated separately for girls and for boys. The mean score for girls on the PAS was 16.6 (SD = 4.37), slightly lower than for boys (mean = 17.8, SD = 4.12). Welch's t-test was conducted, finding this difference was statistically significant ($t = -2.24$, $df = 233.4$, $p = .026$).

This suggests that girls perceived a lower level of support for their autonomy in the classroom than did boys. This may imply that teachers needed to provide more choices, encourage more questions, exert more efforts to understand students' needs and support their sense of competence when working with girls. However, note that reliability for this test was low (see above). Girls' and boys' scores are illustrated in the box plots in Figure 4.

Table 4. Summary of PAS scores.

Group	N	Mean	SD
Girls	136	16.6	4.37
Boys	107	17.8	4.12
All	243	17.1	4.30

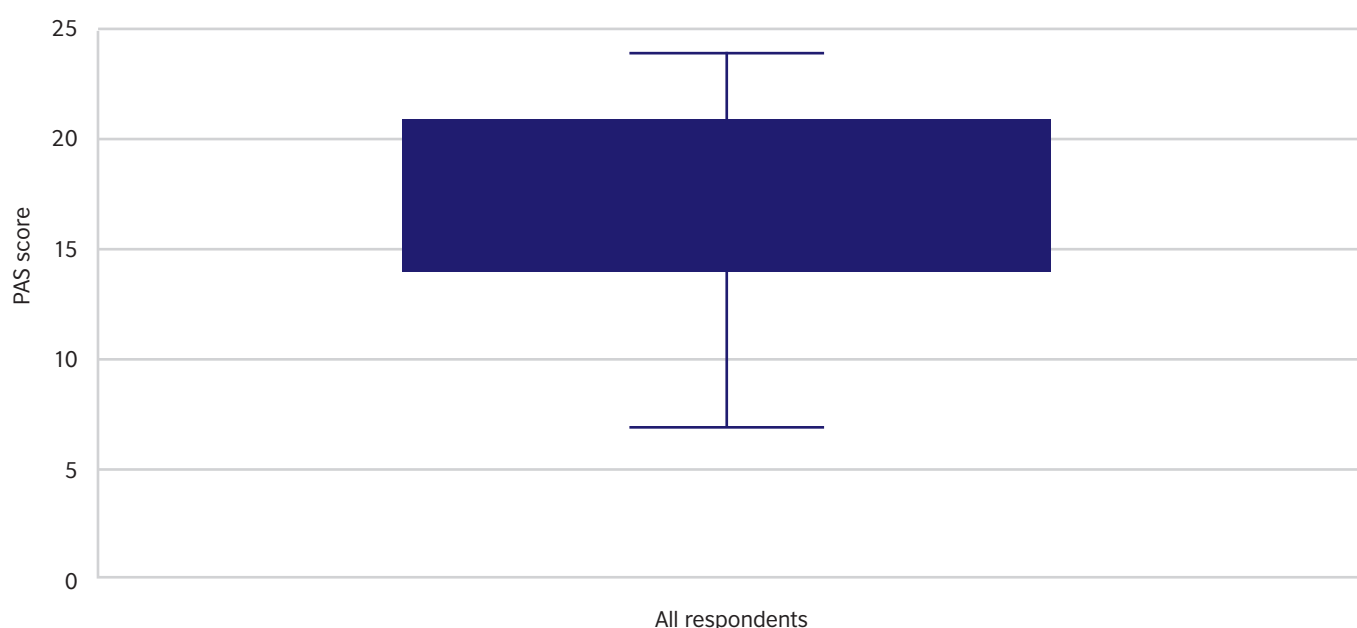


Figure 3. PAS scores, all respondents.

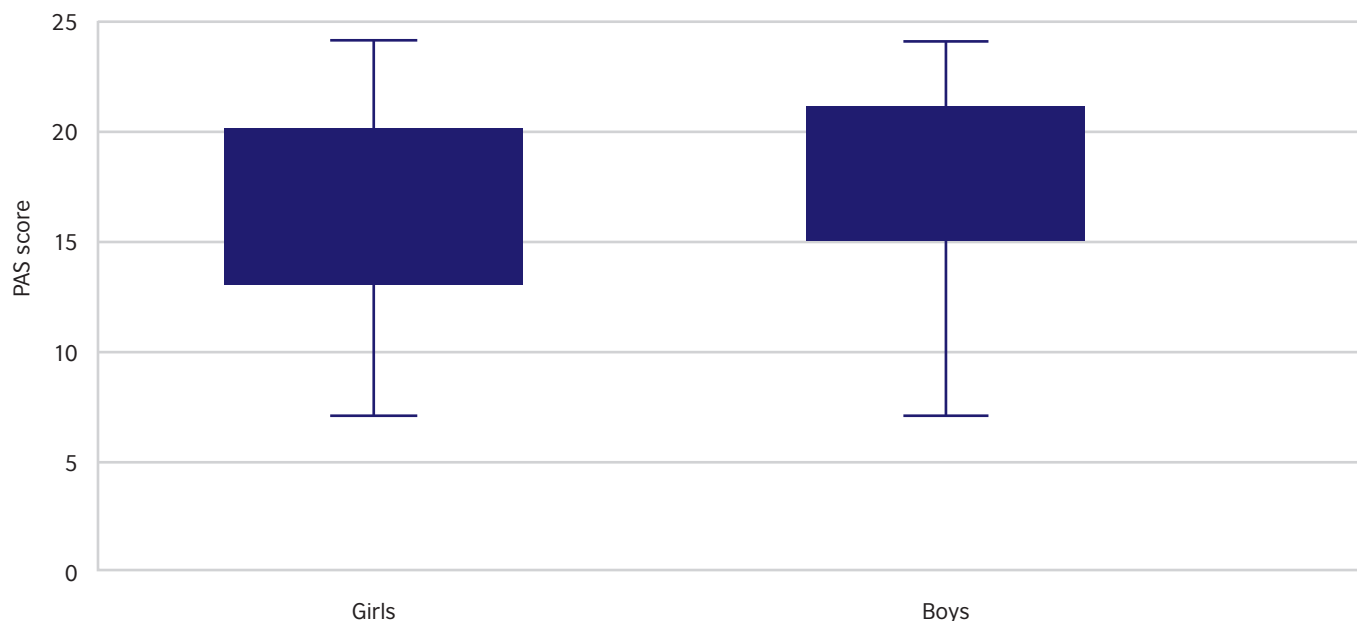


Figure 4. PAS scores, by gender.

Differences in perceived autonomy support between girls and boys

As above, the differences between boys' and girls' responses to individual questions were also explored. Welch's t-test was conducted to compare group means for girls and boys for each item in the PAS. Results are summarised in table 5. Statistically significant differences were found for two items: My English teacher provides choices and options ($t=-3.67$, $df=228.2$, $p<.001$) and My English teacher

understands what I need ($t=-2.38$, $df=240.8$, $p.02$). In both cases boys perceived greater autonomy support than did girls. The fact that girls perceived lower support for their autonomy than boys could be an indication that girls needed teachers to provide stronger support for their autonomy especially in terms of providing choices and understanding their needs.

Table 5. Comparison of girls' and boys' responses to PAS items. Asterisks denote statistically significant differences in responses between girls and boys.

Item	Girls	Boys	t	Df	p
My English teacher provides choices and options.	2.42	3.00	-3.67	228.2	.00*
My English teacher understands what I need.	2.75	3.09	-2.38	240.8	.02*
My English teacher believes that I will do well.	3.23	3.31	-0.69	237.4	.49
My English teacher wants me to ask questions.	2.66	2.94	-1.92	228.8	.06
My English teacher listens to me.	2.88	3.01	-0.91	233.04	.36
My English teacher sees my point of view.	2.63	2.43	1.43	229.03	.15

c. The Autonomy Need Satisfaction scale (ANS)

Descriptive statistics for ANS are summarised in table 6. The mean ANS score was 8.0 with standard deviation 2.45. The distribution of scores is illustrated in the box plot in Figure 5. The box plot indicates that children’s responses were slightly skewed towards agreeing that their autonomy needs were being met.

Mean scores were also calculated separately for girls and for boys. The mean ANS score for girls was 8.12 (SD = 2.31), slightly higher than for boys (mean = 7.83, SD = 2.62). Welch’s t-test was conducted, but this difference was not statistically

significant ($t = 0.913, df = 213.1, p = .362$), suggesting that – despite the differences in their perceptions of autonomy support – there was no significant difference between boys and girls in their experiences of autonomy-need-satisfaction in the classroom. Girls’ and boys’ scores are illustrated in the box plots in Figure 6.

Table 6. Summary of ANS scores.

Group	N	Mean	SD
Girls	136	8.12	2.31
Boys	107	7.83	2.62
All	243	8.0	2.45

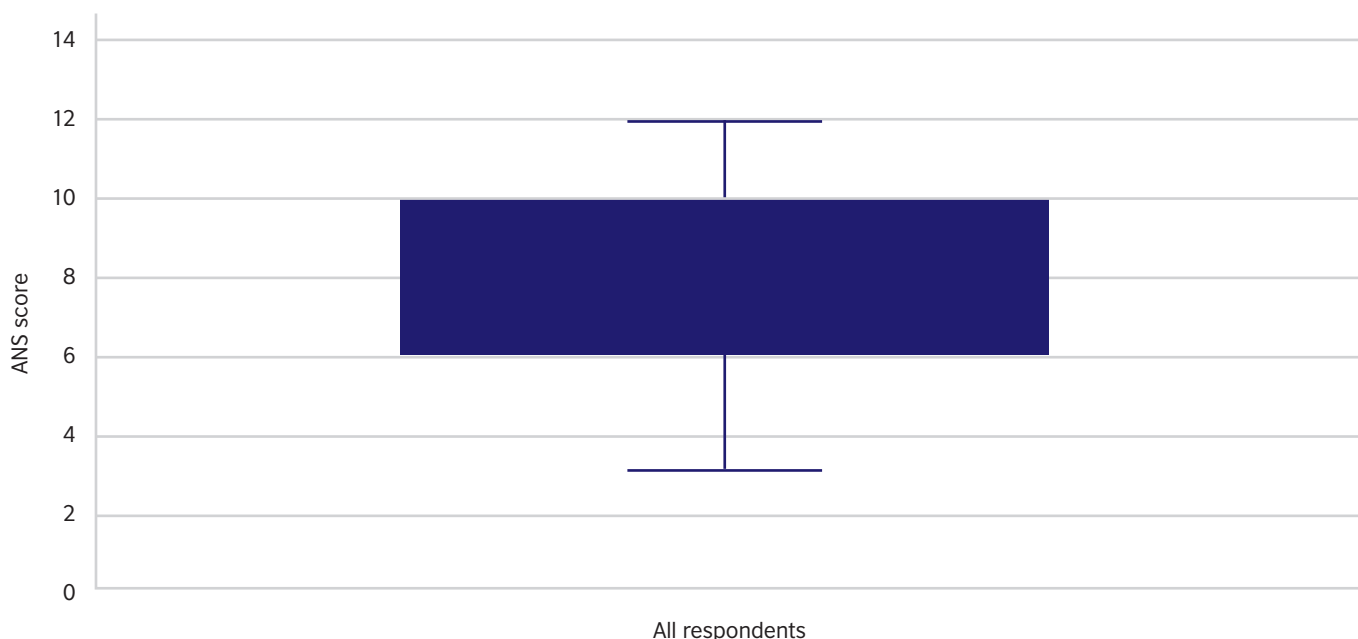


Figure 5. ANS scores, all respondents.

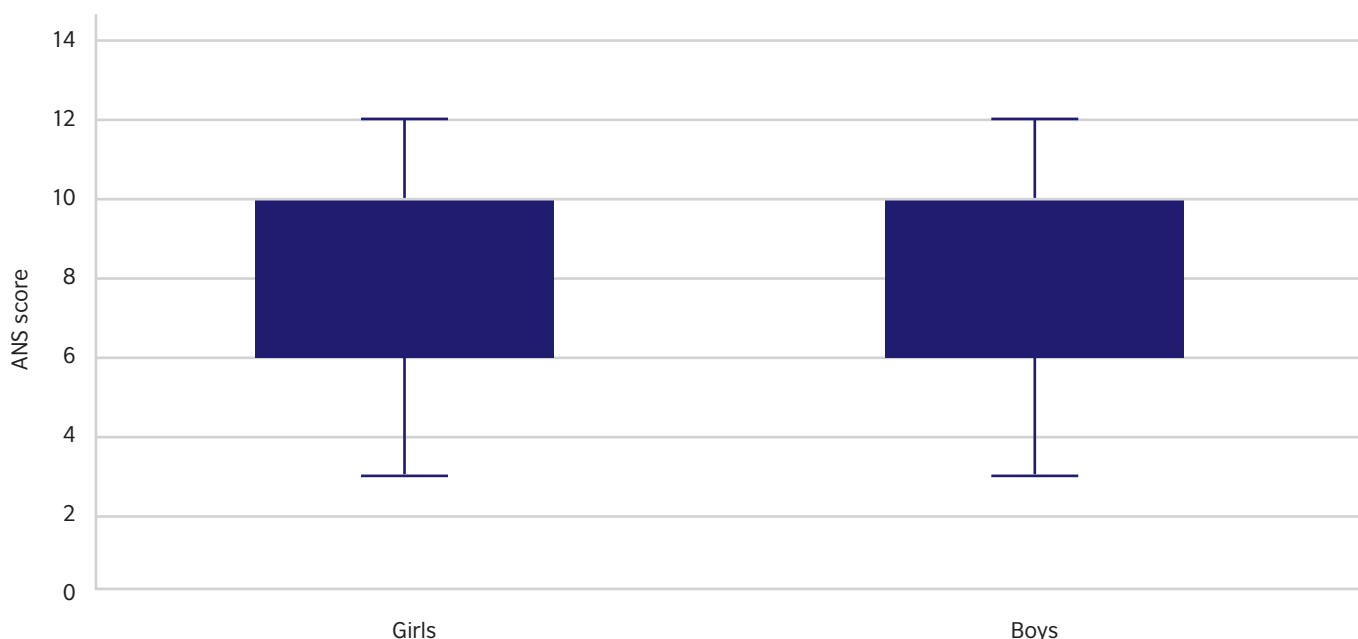


Figure 6. ANS scores by gender.

d. Correlational analysis

The relationships between the three scale variables were investigated further by using Pearson's r , applying a Bonferroni adjustment for multiple correlations. It was found that all three scales, FLCAS, PAS and ANS, were correlated with each other. Anxiety (FLCAS) was negatively correlated with both autonomy support (PAS, $r = -.25$, $p < .001$) and autonomy need satisfaction (ANS, $r = -.37$, $p < .001$), suggesting that more anxious children were likely to have lower perceptions of support for autonomy and less likely to feel that their need for autonomy was being met. Autonomy support was positively correlated with autonomy need satisfaction ($r = .55$, $p < .001$), suggesting that pupils who felt that teachers provided them with more support for autonomy were more likely to feel that their needs for autonomy were being met.

4.2. Findings from the qualitative data

a. Triggers for and descriptions of anxiety

In response to the sentence starter 'Speaking in class is difficult when ...' [ISS2], the children listed a number of factors that made it difficult for them to speak English in class, including several factors related to anxiety. Because attainment in exams was the main driving force behind classroom behaviours, children who struggled with English were constantly reminded of their lack of *competence* (which was compounded by their lack of *relatedness*); and this appeared to provoke anxiety. We asked Rami, in interview, when he felt *least* anxious in class, and he replied, 'When I understand' [INT]. Similarly, Amel told us that the best aspect about speaking a dialogue during pairwork was that she 'knew how to say the words' [INT]. Amira explained that she wanted to understand the lesson, 'So I don't go home feeling I didn't do well and then get upset' [INT].

Evidently, lack of perceived competence was related to anxiety. This curtailment of a sense of competence, leading to increased anxiety, was unsurprising in a context where the teacher conveyed that making mistakes was a negative event. The teacher tended to be positioned, as evidenced in the children's words, as the 'Prime Knower' who 'work[ed] students' input into acceptable answers to exam-type questions' (Lin, 2007, 88). In relation to the Prime Knower, the children seemed to feel anxious and inhibited. A striking feature of our findings was the extent to which children felt afraid to make mistakes because they feared being punished by the teacher. When asked what the teacher could do to *help* them learn to speak English better, 125 out of the 281

pupils stated that they needed the teacher *not* to shout at them or hit them – as the most helpful act. This finding spanned all nine classes. Yacoub put it succinctly during interview: 'I can't understand and learn from a teacher who hits me'. When asked what they found difficult in learning to speak English [ISS1], 93 out of 281 children mentioned their anxiety of being reprimanded if they made mistakes:

I cannot read, and this makes me afraid that the teacher will get angry with me. When I cannot read, the teacher is angry. Fear is the biggest obstacle, fear that the other pupils in the class will laugh at me or that the teacher gets upset with me. [ISS2].

It is notable that other pupils' criticisms were also cause for anxiety, emphasising the relationship between *relatedness*, competence and anxiety. There were 25 children who specifically mentioned how the focus on right answers made them anxious:

When I make mistakes, the teacher shouts at me and I feel that I am not good at English [ISS4].

When I have to speak in front of someone of whom I feel afraid, or who is unkind to me, when this happens, I forget everything [ISS4].

McMillan and Moore (2020) remind us that, a negative 'being wrong' climate is developed when teachers focus mostly on students who provide correct answers, chide children who give wrong answers and immediately correct wrong answers (p.3). It may surprise some readers that teachers did chide (or shout at) pupils when they gave incorrect responses, but this was seen as potentially motivating or helpful in the research context.

There were 19 children who commented explicitly on the connections among competence, relatedness and anxiety. These children felt anxious that other pupils would laugh at them when they made mistakes. During observation, we witnessed this occurrence. Pupils laughed when one boy made a mistake, and the teacher did little to deter them. Low-attainer Amel illustrated why she believed she could be stigmatised as 'weak', when she said in her interview:

I do not like to speak a lot in English because I make mistakes. I do not like English. I feel upset because my classmates can read, and I cannot. My classmates laugh at me and tell me that I cannot speak English [INT].

When asked how they could help themselves speak English better, the children seemed aware that they needed to break through their anxiety:

I should not feel afraid and should have self-confidence when speaking and I should trust myself [SS3].

However, most interview children described how teachers did *not* encourage an anxiety-free classroom, perhaps because they did not encourage the necessary accompaniments to competence – *relatedness* and *autonomy*. For example, children were afraid that teachers would be angry by being interrupted by pupils' questions or pupils offering opinions during lessons, processes that might promote both *relatedness* and *autonomy*:

The teacher might be annoyed and get more annoyed... Sometimes the teacher is angry. His work is being delayed, so he feels angry [Khuwaila, INT].

Some children [n=35/281 across sentence starters] emphasised good relations with teachers, suggesting that teachers should be kind and patient with children and answer their questions and not be cross when they made mistakes. They used phrases such as 'give me time to try and say answers myself'; 'try to understand what the children need'; and 'learn why they do not like English'. They suggested that commonly-used labels such as being 'weak' might not be helpful:

Teachers should not make us feel that we are a failure and instead they should cooperate with us pupils to make us better [SS4].

In the drawing activity, we sought to further explore, from the children's perspectives, how they experienced anxiety and what factors triggered anxiety the most during pairwork speaking activities. Two main themes emerged from analysing the drawings; these were, predictably: fear of peer pressure; and fear of making mistakes.

Peer pressure was caused by: i) peer ridicule when a child made a mistake and ii) feeling less competent than other children in class. Figure 7 below provides a vivid illustration of peer ridicule during a pairwork speaking activity. In this drawing, the child drew herself in tears while the other children in class were laughing at her because she failed to answer correctly. The child wrote, "I feel afraid when I don't know how to answer in front of my classmates, and everyone starts laughing at me. Then, I feel *broken!*".



Figure 7. A picture showing peers laughing at a child who could not speak correctly.

Feeling less competent, in comparison to other peers, was another source of peer pressure. Figure 8 illustrates a child in tears because she could not provide her partner with the correct answer and therefore perceived herself to be 'less' competent, and of a lower status than her partner. The child wrote, 'Rehana, my classmate, asks me about the meaning of a word and I whisper quietly to myself that I don't know the answer'.



Figure 8. A picture showing a child in tears for not knowing the correct answer.

Lack of peer support and relatedness, particularly when a child lacked competence or felt anxious, could impact on children’s learning in an obstructive way. On the other hand, peer support could help children overcome feelings of ‘fear’ and ‘being stuck’. Figure 9 below illustrates how one child was able to complete a task successfully when she shared her worries with a classmate and received support and reassurance in return. The child wrote: ‘I tell my classmate that I am afraid, but she helps me and tells me the answer and then I can go on.’



Figure 9. A picture showing a child being supported by a classmate.

Many of the children’s drawings illustrated classroom situations during which teachers’ actions were perceived to trigger anxiety and fear. The most frequently illustrated situation was that of fear of making mistakes and thus being reprimanded by the teacher or failing to gain the teacher’s approval and certification that a child was ‘good’. Children’s illustrations revealed how children’s participation was often curtailed by the prospect of being unable to provide the correct and expected ‘model’ response. For example, Figure 10 below shows a teacher monitoring a pairwork speaking activity. The child described her feeling about the teacher’s monitoring by saying: ‘... when the teacher is around and I say one word incorrectly, I start to feel nervous, and I feel that the teacher will think that I am useless’.

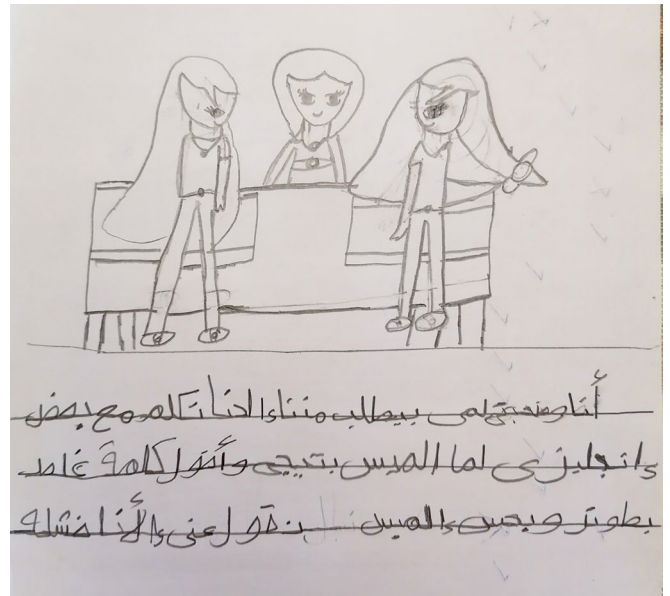


Figure 10. A picture showing a teacher monitoring pairwork.

Similarly, Figure 11 shows the teacher urging the child to speak in English and the child is in tears for fear of the prospect of the teacher’s reprimand; the child commented: ‘I feel very afraid, and I stutter because I think that the teacher will shout at me and hit me. Then I cannot speak, and I tremble.’



Figure 11. A picture showing a child in tears for fear of the teacher’s reprimand.

How teachers monitored pairwork activities and responded to mistakes was important. Teachers needed to monitor pupils in a supportive, responsive and non-threatening way, which could mean monitoring from a distance. They needed to embrace and welcome mistakes as learning opportunities rather than intolerant incidents that necessitated punishment. When teachers, directly or indirectly, reinforced the view of mistakes as intolerable and unwelcome, they triggered anxiety and impaired pupils’ sense of competence and therefore, created classroom atmosphere that was not conducive for learning. On the other hand, when teachers supported pupils’ sense of competence, pupils felt happy, reassured and confident in their ability to learn and succeed that extended beyond

classroom time. Figure 12 illustrates how a teacher's encouragement and support prompted a child to feel confident to learn and succeed. The child wrote: 'I feel happy because when I can speak well, the teacher has confidence in me, and I feel that I am good at English and will be good in the future.'

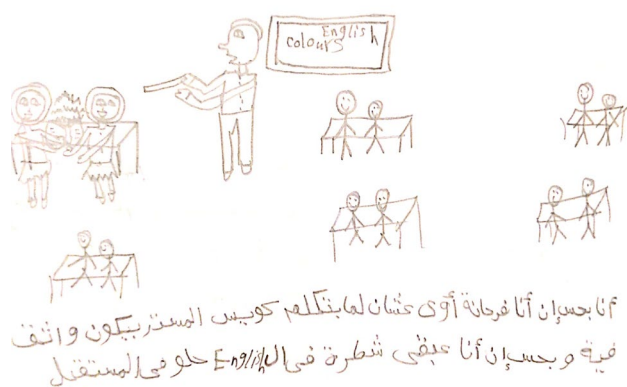


Figure 12. A picture showing a child feeling happy and confident because of the teacher's support.

Fear of making mistakes and thus appearing less competent than other pupils in class and being subjected to the teacher's reprimand and peers' ridicule could curtail pupils' participation and eventually constrain their ability to develop speaking skills in English. As illustrated in these drawings, a child who is in tears, or stuttering or who feels *broken*, finds it difficult to engage in the lesson, or to learn and grow. On the other hand, a child who feels related to peers, and competent, is more likely to be happy and confident to participate and learn during class time and beyond.

b. Enhancers and descriptions of autonomy

We have illustrated how *relatedness* and *autonomy* were linked to anxiety and to each other. Another striking feature of our findings was the extent to which children perceived a need for more *autonomy*, despite the questionnaire results which suggested otherwise. The climate of the classroom did not seem to us to encourage them to exercise agency, and in their sentence-starter responses and interviews, the children expressed discontent with this situation. There were 63 children (22.4%) who indicated that they felt at least somewhat overwhelmed by English lessons and believed they could not speak or understand English sufficiently. This rather large proportion were led to feel a lack of agency or, otherwise put, a lack of the capacity to initiate their own actions. Interviewee Amel, for example, commented on her sense of disempowerment:

The teacher reads a lot and speaks a lot in English, and sometimes I don't know what she is saying [INT].

The participants therefore requested teachers not to overload them with too many words or tasks at once as this gave them a sense of powerlessness rather than *autonomy*. One child expressed their eroded sense of agency as follows:

When I have so many things to study, my head hurts and I can't do it and the teacher shouts at me [SS4].

However, children reported some instances within the existing system which they perceived to offer opportunities for their exercise of agency. Even before pairwork was introduced, a few interview children reported that their teacher would have *sometimes* been open to being told when the children did not understand. Rami told us of his teacher, for example, 'I will stand up and tell him the lesson was hard and I didn't understand it... He will accept it' [INT].

Other examples of situations in which children indicated their own sense of competence and autonomy included references to their desire to teach others English [SS5]. Such an activity would demand agency on the part of the teacher-child. One child even believed that she could correct her teacher when she made mistakes in class. This confidence and capacity to initiate learning in such situations reflects some perception and exercise of agency whereby intrinsic motivation to learn for the sake of learning seems to be a key driving force.

In pairwork, agency appeared to be heightened for most children [SS5]. This seemed to be partly because the partner could play the part of the supportive, understanding teacher and might also enhance the children's sense of *relatedness*. However, the organisation of pairwork where children exercised their agency was not straightforward. Any pairwork or groupwork is likely to illuminate existing issues in relationships and can potentially exacerbate these if not handled carefully (Greenaway et al., 2015). In our study, teachers had received guidance on the need to promote *relatedness* among their pupils for successful pairwork, as well as promoting *agency* and *competence*. However, problems with relationships were provoked by the pervading classroom emphasis on reaching correct answers and proving oneself better than others, even during pairwork,

unless it was implemented with great care. Yacoub, for example, was indignant during the interview at how his own agency was restricted by competition pervading pairwork:

One time in class I stopped at a word, and I was about to read it, but I found my friend saying it. The teacher was saying [to the friend], 'You're better than Yacoub' [INT].

It seems that the teachers, contrary to how they had been trained to support CAR, sometimes monitored and assessed the pupils even as they engaged in pairwork, thereby continuing to inhibit their relatedness, competence *and* agency. One child described:

I am afraid that I may say something wrong while the teacher is passing next to me and that the teacher will shout loudly at me [SS5].

On the other hand, in many cases, children acknowledged feeling that pairwork allowed them to exercise their agency more readily and this enhanced their learning to speak English. There were 153 SS respondents (54.4% within SS5) who told us that they liked speaking in pairs and that it made them happy: which would provide a healthy grounding for agentic learning. For some children, it seemed that agency – expressed during a supportive relationship in pairwork – was an antidote to the otherwise controlled and silent classroom and therefore particularly appropriate for learning to *speak* English. One child, representing several similar responses, specified freedom during pairwork that supported her agency for speaking English:

My partner knows things I do not know. I ask her for help, and I thank her. I do the same for her. We become better friends, we learn better, and we will do better in exams. Choosing roles makes us happy. I choose what is easy for me to start with and then I can move on to the more difficult bit. Feeling free is a good thing [SS5].

Another child expressed relief; and how her agency was allowed to flourish. These led to an enhanced sense of *competence*, within the anxiety-free relatedness of the pair, and this helped her to learn:

I feel relieved because I can learn the words ... in a good way, and this way nothing is difficult for me. Then I have self-confidence [SS5].

However, very importantly, one's partner needed to be someone the children trusted, in which case the fear of comparison with others could be overcome and agency exercised, regardless of the regular classroom environment:

Sometimes I do not feel anxious when I speak with a loyal friend who will not tell anyone about us [SS5].

In initiating pairwork into a classroom, this is a point that needs great emphasis because of the importance of *relatedness* to learning. If the sense of a trusting *relationship* were missing, neither *competence* nor *autonomy* were likely to flourish.

Some children [n=99] told us, in response to a range of sentence-starters, that they were additionally able to exercise their autonomy by thinking analytically about which processes during pairwork actually helped them most, thereby also reflecting *agency* in their thought processes and their motivation for self-improvement. For example, one child reflected:

[The best partners] listen to conversations in the right way. They try to imitate TV dramas. All this helps them to speak in English [SS5].

Another told us:

I spell out the difficult words for myself and get used to saying these words to make them easy for me [SS3].

These children had clearly taken ownership of their own learning which allowed them to drive their own learning forward when the opportunity for pairwork arose, and in other situations where agency was facilitated.

5

Discussion

This research set out to find answers to the questions, ‘In relation to anxiety and autonomy, how do primary pupils experience learning to speak English during classroom pairwork activities? What suggestions do these pupils have for improving their experience of learning to speak English?’ As suggested in our introduction, learning to speak English is not just a linguistic, cognitive exercise but one intimately related to human feelings and indeed, to the learner’s identity or sense of self. This is why, as Vygotsky (1978) suggested, it is only through meaningful interaction within relationship – whereby learners use language to communicate messages, negotiate meaning and receive responsive feedback – that they can test and verify the hypotheses they have developed about its systems. Interaction – within a safe relationship and with autonomy – then is crucial to the development of language knowledge and competencies; because interaction is a social and culturally-contextualised activity. Our research reinforced the idea that learning to speak English demanded its own range of supports, sometimes different from those needed for learning to read or write grammatically-correct English. The findings from our research reinforce Vygotsky’s emphasis on the socio-cultural context of language speaking.

a. Foreign language anxiety in the classroom

It became clear in our findings that the individual’s experience of anxiety during English-speaking lessons could impede their attempts to speak in English (Gan, 2012; Littlewood, 2007; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). As one child expressed it, “Fear is the biggest obstacle, fear that the other pupils in the class will laugh at me or that the teacher gets upset with me” [SS2]. The survey suggested that pupils most often felt anxious when making mistakes. Lack of one’s perceived competence was evidently related to anxiety, but lack of perceived autonomy and relatedness were also obstructive. Because attainment in exams was the main driving force behind classroom behaviours, children who struggled with English were constantly reminded of their lack of *competence*; and this appeared to provoke anxiety. This curtailment of a sense of competence, leading to increased anxiety, was unsurprising in a context where the teacher conveyed that making mistakes was a negative event. However, it was striking to note that the scale item with the lowest mean score was that relating to working in pairs, suggesting that pair work was less anxiety-provoking for pupils.

b. Autonomy support and autonomy-need-satisfaction in the classroom

Deci and Ryan (1985) claimed that three characteristics defined a teacher's style as autonomy supportive: (a) when the teacher adopts the students' perspective and frame of reference during instruction; (b) when the teacher invites, welcomes, and incorporates students' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours into the flow of instruction; and (c) when the teacher supports students' capacity for autonomous self-regulation. Our questionnaire about the children's perceived classroom autonomy was based on these claims. It was striking to note that children *perceived* a need for more autonomy as expressed during interviews and through the sentence starters, despite the mean score on the Autonomy Need Satisfaction scale suggesting that pupils usually had their needs met. One possible explanation for this could be the cultural expectations that would demand learners to show respect for their teachers and, therefore, refrain from criticising them in writing. The young learners in this study could have perceived that providing less favourable responses in the questionnaire about their teachers' autonomy supportive practices to be an act of impoliteness. This might have compromised the validity of some data, as is so often the case with questionnaire data. In contrast, during interviews they were regularly reminded of their anonymity.

Our own observations from the classrooms suggested very limited autonomy within the classroom, except in situations where pairwork was functioning successfully. In pairwork, agency appeared to be heightened for most children and anxiety lessened. As one child expressed her experience of carrying out dialogues in pairs, "Choosing roles makes us happy. I choose what is easy for me to start with and then I can move on to the more difficult bit. Feeling free is a good thing" [SS5].

We were also struck by how some of the children in our study had clearly taken ownership of their own learning. This allowed them to drive their own learning forward when the opportunity for pairwork arose. It is possible that many of the children sustained a sense of autonomy despite rarely being given the opportunity to exercise this autonomy.

c. Boys' and girls' differences in relation to anxiety and autonomy in the EFL classroom

Overall, our results suggested that girls experienced anxiety more frequently than boys. It seems that girls differed from boys with regard to peer pressure in particular as they reported experiencing more frequent anxiety when speaking in English for fear of being ridiculed by peers in class. Girls also reported that they felt anxious more frequently when it came to making mistakes than did boys. This finding could relate to our other finding that boys were more likely than girls to report that their teachers provided choices and options in class, and that their teachers understood their needs. The finding that learners' perceptions of higher support for their autonomy and higher autonomy need satisfaction was associated with lower speaking anxiety in the classroom suggests that further investigation of this relationship could be fruitful. This might include exploration of the direction of the relationship and of the role of gender and interactions within the classroom, as well as investigating the relationship of these variables to pupil outcomes in English language learning.

6

Implications for practice and research

a. Recommendations for practice

When asked what the teacher could do to *help* them learn to speak English better, 125 out of 281 pupils (44.4%) stated that they needed the teacher *not* to shout at them. They also used phrases such as ‘give me time to try and say answers myself’; ‘try to understand what the children need’; and ‘learn why they do not like English’. As one child put it, “Teachers should not make us feel that we are a failure and instead they should cooperate with us pupils to make us better” [SS4]. The participants therefore requested teachers not to overload them with too many words or tasks at once as this gave them a sense of powerlessness rather than competence or autonomy. One child expressed their eroded sense of competence and autonomy as follows, “When I have so many things to study, my head hurts and I can’t do it and the teacher shouts at me” [SS4]. The implication for practice here is clear, that children felt better able to learn to speak English when they felt relaxed, unpressured and unjudged; when the teacher adapted her/his teaching to the responses and preferences of the children; when the teacher encouraged rather than criticised; and when the teacher focused on fluency rather than grammatical accuracy. Support for children’s sense of all three – competence, autonomy and relatedness [CAR] – appeared to be key, as predicted by Ryan and Deci (2019).

With regard to using pairwork in the classroom, our qualitative findings illustrate that when operated sensitively, pairwork greatly reduced anxiety and increased a sense of agency, often via the medium of relatedness. However, teachers needed to pay careful attention to how pairs were formed so that children were working with a partner whom they liked and trusted. If they failed to do this, a child’s peers could be just as anxiety-provoking as their teachers. Teachers also needed to make sure that they did not inhibit children’s speaking of English by monitoring their performance in a direct way by pointing out mistakes or even hovering too close to a couple engaged in dialogue. Attention to this detail was made particularly important, given the pervading classroom emphasis on reaching correct answers and proving oneself better than others.

Findings from this research have also highlighted children’s capacity for reflecting on their learning and suggesting ways to improve it. We strongly recommend that teachers recognise this ability and draw on it to increase children’s expression of autonomy and their decision-making over how they learn. It is often the case that young learners’ voices are overlooked, especially in educational contexts where greater emphasis is on performance rather than learning processes. This denies teachers the knowledge and understandings they need to guide the construction of effective learning environments; and the use of classroom activities that are responsive and conducive to young learners’ linguistic development and well-being.

We propose that teachers can use simple activities to find out what children think and feel, similar to the ones used in this research (e.g., the Sentence Starters and Drawing) which could be easily integrated in everyday classroom teaching and learning routines. Next, teachers would need to adjust their teaching to respond to identified learners' needs. When learners feel that their voice matters and that their suggestions are integrated in classroom teaching and learning activities, they are more likely to feel engaged and motivated to learn. To fulfil this requirement, teachers also need to ask for feedback from their learners, and to build opportunities in the classroom to observe learners while they complete tasks and take notice of their engagement across a wide range of tasks and classroom situations.

We propose, drawing on these findings, that teachers:

- act as models themselves of enjoying the challenge of trying to speak, rather than correcting how children speak, even if their English is not fluent;
- encourage children by seeing them as fellow-English speakers and engaging in English conversation with them when possible;
- avoid threats of punishment for children making mistakes in speaking;
- avoid labelling children as 'strong' or 'weak' and instead treat all children as enthusiastic learners;
- use open-ended questions and tasks that require more than one correct/ acceptable answer. This will allow teachers to give feedback on content and ideas rather than focussing on grammatically correct language and standardised answers.

Our findings have also highlighted the benefit of children experiencing autonomy in their learning. Based on this, we propose that teachers should:

- organise pairwork among all children at the same time, so that each pair feels comfortable with each other and thereby has anxiety-free space to experiment with speaking, following efficient teacher modelling of the activity;
- encourage children to reflect on what helps them learn to speak best and give them opportunities to act on their individual preferences; and
- allow children to tell them when they have grasped what they are learning before moving on to new topics.

b. Recommendations for future research

- Findings from this research have evidenced that the way teachers structure and monitor classroom pairwork speaking activities is a key determinant in facilitating or constraining cognitive learning and children's wellbeing. When teachers selected pairs who failed to relate well or support each other, some children experienced anxiety and felt incompetent and intimidated to speak. Similarly, when children perceived teachers' monitoring of pairwork activities primarily to focus on spotting mistakes and evaluating performance, they felt insecure and anxious- all of which curtailed learning and willingness to speak in English.
- Further research needs to be conducted to explore and understand the dynamic interaction between teachers' use of different pairing techniques and variables such as young learners' language proficiency, anxiety threshold, autonomy and language performance. A second area of research could be to investigate the impact of the use of teacher's feedback that supports children's need for competence, relatedness and autonomy on their language learning, and particularly development of speaking skills.

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