

CHAPTER 11

VOCATIONAL STUDENTS' ORAL PERFORMANCE IN CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND EVALUATIVE PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

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We work at Lier Upper Secondary School, a vocational school for students aged 16-19. We teach child and youth care classes together and have the luxury of being two teachers sharing a group of 19 students. Our tight-knit collaboration gave rise to an action-research project that aimed at improving our teaching methods and ultimately, our students' learning outcomes.

Our students can work in various aspects of child and youth care when they graduate, or they can continue to college/university to take a bachelor's degree, which will help them qualify for more positions in child and youth care. The child and youth care curriculum aims to educate them to become practical, communicative, and reflective professionals who can work with children and teenagers from the age of one year up until eighteen.

In a vocational school, students should acquire both practical and theoretical knowledge as well as develop the characteristics, attitudes, and skills needed to become skilled workers in the future. Therefore, we see it as useful for the students to work with practical, vocationally oriented subjects and to develop a professional language that they can use in collaboration with colleagues, parents, children, and young people.

For us, it is important that the students' voices are heard in the various parts of the learning process so that we might understand their learning needs. Consequently, we see students' verbal expressions as enlightening us on what they have understood and might be struggling with. Thus, we believe it is essential that the students express themselves verbally in the classroom.

As part of our professional development as teachers, we recognise that being open to students' input means that you are able to change, to think anew. In order for the student's input to be valued, we as teachers must take action and make arrangements for it to play out in the classroom. Having an open mindset means that you dare to accept the input the students bring. By listening to the students' academic and social needs in the classroom, it might also provide both motivation and an opportunity to master skills that will be useful in the future.

During the school year, students are assessed according to the competence targets in the child and youth care programme's curriculum. There is an oral examination at the end of the school year and several formative evaluations during the semester. Formative evaluation takes place in the form of planned professional conversations between a group of students (occasionally, there is only one student) and/or the two of us teachers. The students are told the topic for the conversation and given the evaluation criteria 48 hours in advance, so they should have time to prepare.

However, we have experienced that our students do not fulfil their potential in these evaluative professional conversations, and furthermore, they are anxious both before and during the conversations. We wondered what we could do to improve our students' achievements during evaluative professional conversations. Thus, our investigation asks the following questions:

- What enables our students' verbal activity in class?
- What do our students need to be able to master spoken academic language in evaluative professional conversations?

We carried out our research in a child and youth care class where there were two of us teaching throughout the entire year. Being two teachers had many benefits for our research. For example, we could discuss our research approach, what we wanted to improve, one of us could observe while the other taught the class, and we could write up the results together. This was a major motivational factor for the research project.

The students were aged between 17 and 20 and of mixed genders. We teach this class for four 45-minute sessions per week. There was a maximum of 20 students, and there were no students with special needs. We have digital books, computers, and other creative materials available. This class started as two separate classes, but they were brought together due to a lack of students at the beginning of the study year.

The class was largely quiet — only a few students were verbally active during lessons. We observed this over time. In contrast, we noticed a difference in the students' ease of talking when we visited them in their field practice compared to their silence in the classroom. They seemed less engaged in the classroom teaching environment than in their field placements and even when they were orally active, they seemed to lack verbal skills and the confidence to express their own professional competence in child and youth care. Worryingly, we had heard of incidents of verbal bullying among some of the students during the school year, so we decided to start our investigation by asking the students why they are not orally active in class in an anonymous, online survey (pre-survey).

In the pre-survey, the students expressed that they felt insecure in the class and that they needed security to be able to express themselves academically. Thus, we wondered if planning for social activities in lessons could improve the relationships between the students and create a safer class environment. We decided to try out an intervention where we include non-evaluative social activities into the lessons.

We know that in this action research project, time is an important factor. It takes time to change a classroom environment and improve relationships. We are unsure whether it is possible to implement and bring about changes in such a short period of time. Nevertheless, we are hopeful that some of the students will benefit from our actions and, at the very least, we teachers will benefit from learning more about our students' learning needs.

Methods

We wished to investigate what the students needed to be able to be verbally active and decided to ask them directly. As mentioned previously, we started with a digital pre-survey. The answers from the pre-survey laid the groundwork for two further surveys – one halfway through the research period and one at the end. We asked them five questions in each of the digital surveys. It was important for us that the surveys were anonymous so that the answers were as honest as possible, and the students did not feel judged. We tried not to lead students to answer in a predetermined way but nevertheless helped us to answer our research questions.

We wanted to start from the here and now situation in the class and thus used the original syllabus in the subject. However, we wanted the research to become a natural part of the lesson and include the students' responses in our action

research. Nevertheless, we had to inform the students in the class that the activities and data that we generated from the lessons would be sent to universities and thus, had to ensure their anonymity. The students received information explaining that their contributions would be impossible to trace back to them personally, nor would we be using their contributions to assess their grades.

Balancing the role of teacher and researcher in the classroom can be problematic. However, as a teacher, you often adjust teaching methods according to your students' learning needs. Often, you discuss methods with colleagues, ask your students for feedback on the lessons, and gather ideas from various sources to help you make your lessons better suited to your students. The main difference for us with having researcher roles was that our lesson adaptations would be based on reflections on the data we gathered systematically, rather than basing adaptations on gut feeling or professional judgement.

We gathered data through three surveys using Mentimeter, an internet-based student response system. There was a pre-survey, an in-progress survey midway through the research period, and a final survey. All surveys were done anonymously online. Some questions had scale-based answer options and others were open-ended questions with the option of using your own words when answering.

Although we had landed on the research questions at the start of the project, we were not sure as to the direction the project would take, as we were doing action research. This type of research means that you have to be open to unexpected course changes and embrace surprises (McNiff, 2013). Thus, when our initial round of questioning indicated a need to implement change in the classroom activities, we decided to explore an intervention where we introduced social activities in the lesson plans. Below are the questions we posed in the three surveys and an explanation of the social activities we organised during the project's intervention:

Questions from Pre-survey 1

- 1) What do you need to be verbally active?
- 2) What kind of instruction do you need to be verbally active in class?
- 3) What do you need to prepare for an evaluative professional conversation?
- 4) Do the teaching methods influence your ability to be verbally active?

The Intervention

We hoped that planning social activities in the lessons would help the students interact and feel more comfortable with each other, to feel more secure with each other, which in turn would make a new and better starting point for developing verbal activity and learning. We chose four different activities:

1. Cultural Cafe

We organised a cultural cafe where we served Turkish tea and biscuits. This social activity encouraged the students to talk to each other. The students mingled and moved around the classroom, and we observed that group boundaries dissolved, with most students engaging in conversations with many others. Sharing food and drinks seemed to foster a sense of pride among those students who had a cultural connection to the dishes being served. This exchange sparked new discussions about culture and food that had not previously taken place. As teachers, we were able to connect these conversations to the subject we were working on at the time. Moreover, the activity allowed us to build stronger relationships with the students by participating in the sharing of personal stories about food traditions.

2. Origami

We had provided paper for the students so they could make paper airplanes. They folded the paper, decorated it with colours, and at the end we had a competition to see whose plane flew furthest. This activity also made students cooperate and be social together. They engaged in conversation, initially speaking cautiously and quietly before becoming more enthusiastic, incorporating subject-related reflections into their discussions. Some students had prior experience with origami, while others had little to no experience. As a result, those unfamiliar with origami sought assistance from those who were more skilled. To learn how to fold the paper correctly, students had to listen carefully to one another and articulate their instructions in different ways. This led to discussions about various types of origami planes and the functions different designs could serve. Students also shared experiences from their internships, describing similar activities they had organised and their observations of children engaging with origami planes. We observed that students felt comfortable asking for help, and that those who typically did not participate verbally became actively engaged in the discussion. Their contributions were valued, as they possessed the necessary expertise for the task at hand.

3. Games

Based on the students' interests, we planned various games for them to play in the classroom. Students training to become child and youth workers need knowledge of different types of play. This is therefore also useful for their practical skills. The students played four different games in the classroom:

- Knutemor (The Human Knot)
- Nøkkelknippe (The Keychain Game)
- Stolleken (Musical Chairs)
- Stafett (Relay Race)

When the students engaged in play in the classroom, we observed that they laughed, talked to each other, and relaxed. They appeared content and secure.

4. Workstations

To encourage conversations among the students, we organised workstations in the classroom. The stations combined academic tasks with engaging, hands-on activities. To complete the tasks, students had to use their speaking skills. The goal was for students to experience a sense of mastery and collaboration with their peers. Some tasks had a humorous undertone, creating space for joy and a positive learning experience.

Survey Design

Questions from In-progress Survey 2:

In the pre-survey, students had expressed feelings of insecurity in the classroom, so we wanted to deepen our knowledge of this topic. Our next Mentimeter survey asked the following questions:

- 1) Feeling secure in the classroom
 - a. What do you find dangerous/threatening for your security in the classroom?
 - b. What does feeling secure in the classroom mean to you?
- 2) Working in groups
 - a. How many people do you think a group should consist of?
 - b. Why?
 - c. Is there anything else about groups that is important to you?

- 3) Teachers want discussions to be orally active in class: How can the teacher support your oral activity?
- 4) What is it about competence targets that makes them incomprehensible?

Questions from Post-survey 3:

In the final survey, we wanted to focus on evaluative professional conversations and how to best support students' preparations for formative and summative assessments:

- 1) Does teaching with oral activity affect your ability to become professionally confident?
- 2) Oral activity in class, does it make you better prepared for an evaluative professional conversation?
- 3) What type of teaching do you need to be prepared for an evaluative professional conversation?
- 4) How do you feel that the oral work in recent weeks has affected your oral activity in the classroom?

Participants

Nineteen students participated in the surveys in total. However, there were some absences during the research period, so we did not get 19 student responses for all three surveys. In addition, a few of the questions were not answered by all the students. Nevertheless, we believe that the qualitative data we gathered from the student responses was sufficient for the next stage of our research, which was to analyse the data.

Data Analysis

The analysis process began with collecting the responses, identifying similarities and differences, and trying to sort out patterns in the data in a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We worked with the responses manually, reading them multiple times to fully grasp their content. Since the students had the opportunity to answer freely, the analysis became both more engaging and more challenging due to the considerable variation in response length and content. We identified key terms that encapsulated the students' answers. These key terms were then quantified and organised into a diagram to visually represent the responses. We now turn to our findings, presented alongside the student response diagrams.

Findings

After several rounds of analysis and much discussion between the two of us, we landed on three main topics, or themes for our findings: Security, Groups, and Competence Targets. We now turn to explain how the data supported our findings.

Security

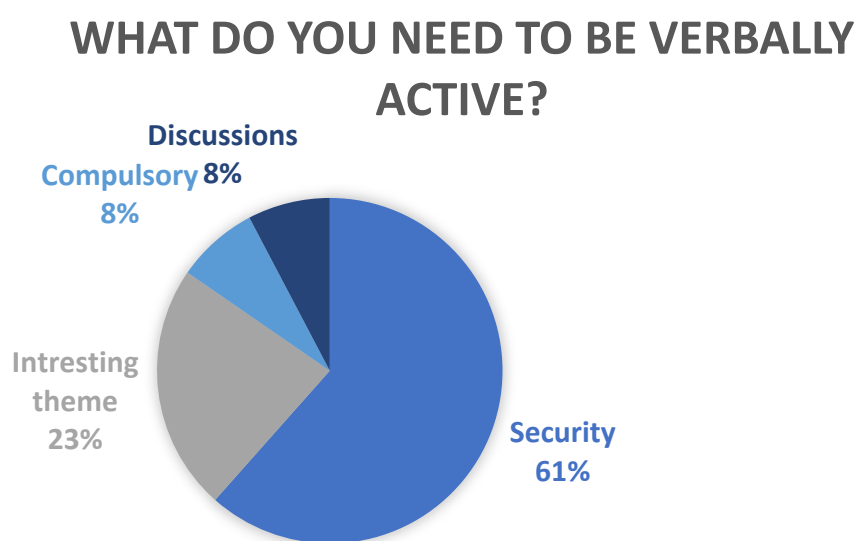


Figure 1. Factors that students consider they need to be verbally active

As Figure 1 illustrates, the majority reported that they needed to feel secure to be verbally active. We were not surprised by this finding, as we had already observed this through our teaching experience. Nevertheless, it did underline the importance of making time for relationship building during the lesson.

After analysing the second survey, we got a wider picture of the meaning behind the word security. By security, the students also meant recognition. Receiving recognition from teachers and peers was important for their feeling of security. They also expressed that having a teacher who provides clear and well-structured instruction helped their sense of security. For the students, clarity was linked to predictability and the perception of being treated fairly. One of the students informed us that to feel safe, they needed “positive relationships in the classroom.” This was a meaningful discovery, and the overall understanding after this finding was that the class needed positive social experiences.

In the next phase of the project, we asked the students to define what could be threatening or challenging to their security and oral activity in the class. We wanted to bring this out as a counterweight to security in the classroom. The students expressed that not being seen and heard by the teacher threatened their security. They wanted recognition for who they are, not only from the teachers, but also from other students in the class. They wrote about a desire to experience support, both academically and socially. We understood this to mean support from the teacher.

The students' responses indicated that the teacher's ability to organise and manage the classroom played a key role in how engaged they were in oral activities. The teacher's role was important for the students' sense of belonging. Students wrote that how the teacher's organisation of seating placements, the predictability of the lesson's structure, and the level of subject difficulty also affect their feeling of security, and consequent engagement in oral activity. They expressed a need for "equality" in class, which we interpreted as being recognised both academically and socially. Finally, the students wrote that open tasks are good for encouraging oral activity as they give opportunities for academic reflection.

Summing up the student responses to the three surveys, we found that to feel secure and engage in oral activity, students needed recognition from a positive social environment (both from peers and teachers), predictability in lessons, and opportunities for reflection. In addition, they expressed that they felt more secure when working in pairs, as it makes it easier for them to use academic language aloud. This brings us to the next finding, which emphasises how working in groups could be beneficial to their feeling of security.

Groups

In the pre-survey, we asked our students what kind of instructions they needed to be verbally active in class. According to the pre-survey answers, "working in groups" was the organisational form that best supported oral activity. Students reported also that discussions stimulated their oral participation. However, presenting something orally was considered least helpful.

In the second survey, we gathered more nuanced information about what "working in groups" meant and in what ways students considered group work to support oral activity. Students expressed satisfaction with being able to do tasks in groups and at making their own tasks in groups. As one student said: "Everyone

has a chance to speak, listen to and feel safe.” They wanted to be safe with a peer, and it was easier to talk safely with one they felt comfortable with.

As teachers, we had previously defined small groups as three or more people. However, the students’ survey responses showed that the students defined groups to be pairs. An interesting finding was that many students mentioned that the group size should be pairs, even though for bigger tasks, they accept being in groups of four.

We found this discovery very interesting because we often talk together about working in groups and think we are talking about the same number of people in groups. Up until now, we had seen groupwork differently from our students. Now, however, we have a common understanding when we discuss possibilities of working in groups and can face the needs of our students in a better way.

The size of the group was not the only factor influencing the students’ oral activity. How the groups are organised was also important. Several students pointed out that they wanted the teacher to put the different pupils into groups, rather than letting the students decide for themselves who they were going to group up with. This provided social security. It was truly clear that it was important that the teacher chose groups for such group activities. At the same time, although the teacher’s role and power resulted in varied compositions of student groups, the students also wanted to be heard. Thus, it became evident to us that the teacher must balance the role as class leader with the role of class listener, responsive to input from the student voice.

Students also expressed that systematic, purposeful oral activities were useful when the students needed to express themselves academically. According to survey 2, the students wanted “open tasks” with a large degree of autonomy so that they had opportunities to solve the task together. This was perceived as motivating. When the students felt engaged, they were more motivated to talk academically.

We noticed that the pupils wanted to be active; they wanted to work in varied ways, and they wanted to be able to express themselves in different ways. Through short sessions of social activities, we experienced that the students began to use their voices. Not in academic English at first, but gradually, the students introduced more and more professional terms from the curriculum, working collaboratively to find solutions to various problems as the activities continued throughout the research period.

In our surveys, we identified several key factors that students consider important when working in groups. The students found that working in groups was very positive for their learning. Students believed that this type of organisation of teaching triggered many varied tasks. Variation in teaching was important for the pupils' focus on learning and on activity in the classroom. A teacher must manage the class clearly, with a well-thought-out structure that allows varied teaching. A teacher must plan activities for groups by discussions, fun and play, meaningful themes, open questions and activate students throughout the lesson in various ways.

Understanding the Competence Targets

Most students reported needing to understand the competence targets. This finding was particularly surprising to us, as students had not previously expressed this need. It served as an eye-opener for us as teachers and highlighted the fundamental importance of ensuring that students understand the meaning of the competence targets, so they can respond effectively and confidently in an academic assessment.

The academic work related to competence targets. These targets are specified in the national curriculum for upper-secondary school education, the child and youth care programme. Many consider these targets broad and general in their formulation. For some, this can create an obstacle to understanding what is to be done, what is relevant, and what learning result is to be achieved, notably in the practical work on the subject. Our surveys showed that understanding the competence targets was essential for the students and that some students struggled to understand them.

This information made it possible for us as teachers to work systematically with competence targets. We changed our methods in the classroom by spending more time when working with competence targets relevant to the topic we were working on. We aimed to explain them clearly using methods that were different and interesting for the students. We learned that students must be given the opportunity to discuss and reflect in small groups what these targets mean in practice. In this way, students can gain a deeper theoretical understanding in their practical work and be better equipped for evaluative professional conversations.

Final Reflections on Our Action Research Project

“What bugs us?” was the beginning of this research making us reflect on some challenges we faced as teachers in vocational subjects. We found ourselves in a situation where we had students who excelled in the field and did a good job in their profession, but in the classroom, they were not able to fulfil their potential and show us what they were capable of. The students’ final exam is both practical and oral. It is important for us to provide the education they need to succeed in the final examination. Evaluative professional conversations (EPCs) are formative assessments that give them the opportunity to train for the exam. We wanted to improve our students’ achievements in these assessments (EPCs) and increase their oral activity in the classroom.

The students were involved in this research from the beginning. They were engaged in their own learning and had to take an active part in developing teaching methods that answered their own needs. Although we do not have data to back up our claim, we believe that involving the students in teaching preparation increased their motivation for learning. Furthermore, we suspect that an indirect consequence of this research project is that the students will feel more self-confident and valued.

One of the challenges in this research was to be able to see ourselves and our teaching with an open mind. The research project on the other hand, gave us the opportunity to investigate the struggles that the students were facing. In our findings the students answered that they needed security, but what is that? We tried, adjusted, and tried again. Were we able to give the students what they needed? We had a very short time doing this research and we realised that making significant changes needs more time. If we had done this over a longer period of time, we think the results would have been more effective.

This project forced us to systematically research our students’ needs and make changes in our teaching methods. We realised that we needed to let the students be more active and participate in their own professional learning. As soon as we started to investigate the needs of our students, we became motivated and engaged on a whole new level than what we had been before. It also made us question the way the school system is built for students who have chosen to study vocational subjects. Our reflections became topics for discussion with colleagues and the school administration.

References

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Appendix

Written Feedback from the Students on Their Experiences of Working with EPC

Question	Student responses
1a) What is dangerous?	Oral presentations. Less focus on communications To participate in groupwork where I'm not safe. Someone laughs at you. To do and say wrong. Speak your mind is dangerous. Negative body language What others think about you Given looks by others
1b. What feels safe for you?	The feeling of been seen and heard Supported by others Belonging Recognition from students and teachers Good discussions Good reflections Positive class where many students participate. Calm class The class has positive relations. Include each other. Teacher control work groups and where students have their seats. Not being judge by others. Support when needed. Friends Work in groups Information by teacher in time. Predictability.
2a) How many students do you think a group should consist of? Why?	2 maximum. 4 students or less. Everyone has a chance to speak, listen to and feel safe. Easier to share work. Easier to listen to each other. To be safer. Everyone can be more participating.

2b) Is there anything else about groups that is important to you?	<p>That the groups are selected by the teachers.</p> <p>That the groups are diverse.</p> <p>Hearing everyone.</p> <p>Having discussions about subject matter.</p> <p>Building good relationships.</p> <p>Similar skill levels within the group so that I don't have to do everything.</p> <p>Perhaps a sense of community.</p> <p>Everyone gets a chance to speak and be heard.</p> <p>Exploring more and learning from each other.</p> <p>Being able to share thoughts with others.</p> <p>Respect.</p> <p>Being placed with someone I can work with.</p> <p>Having at least one person in the group whom I trust.</p> <p>Being able to express preferences that are considered.</p> <p>Working together.</p>
3. How can teachers plan for more oral activity in the classroom?	<p>Open questions</p> <p>Funny questions.</p> <p>Important themes.</p> <p>Discussions.</p> <p>Smaller Groups.</p> <p>Kahoot.</p> <p>Play and discussion.</p> <p>Group task.</p> <p>Group make their own task.</p> <p>Plan more active lessons with various types of work</p> <p>Rules for talking so students can be heard.</p>
4. How can students find competence target so hard to understand?	<p>Many competence target are so alike.</p> <p>Too many.</p> <p>They are understandable but students doesn't use time to work with it.</p> <p>They are easy to misunderstand.</p> <p>Some of them are hard to understand.</p> <p>Some competence goals are written difficult and have difficult language.</p> <p>Teacher explains competence goals different.</p>
