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STRATEGIES TO MINIMIZE LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN GRADE 8 ENGLISH LEARNING CLASSROOM

STRATĒĢIJAS IEMĀCĪTĀS BEZPALĪDZĪBAS SAMAZINĀŠANAI 8.KLASES ANGĻU VALODAS STUNDĀS

DIPLOMDARBS

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Abstract

Learned helplessness was first described by Seligman and his colleagues in 1967, as a part of their research on how previously shocked dogs would later fail to escape electrical shocks in preventable situations. Since then, learned helplessness has become a widely acknowledged idea in psychology, and further research has examined its connection to learning, socialization, and social aspects, such as poverty and disability. The aim of this research was to focus on examining strategies for minimizing learned helplessness in an English language learning classroom, focusing on grade 8 students, with case study and triangulation as chosen methods, gathering data from lesson observations, student questionnaires and their works, if any, as well as an interview with a teacher.

Keywords: learned helplessness, strategies of minimizing learned helplessness, Martin Seligman, English language learning, language learning in a classroom setting, grade 8, language lesson planning

Anotācija

Iemācīto bezpalīdzību Seligmans un viņa kolēģi pirmo reizi aprakstīja 1967. gadā, veicot pētījumu par to, kā iepriekš šokēti suņi vēlāk nespēj izvairīties no elektriskās strāvas trieciena situācijās, kad tas bija iespējams. Kopš tā laika iemācītā bezpalīdzība ir kļuvusi par plaši atzītu teoriju psiholoģijā, un turpmākajos pētījumos ir pētīta tās saistība ar mācīšanos, socializāciju un sociālajiem aspektiem, piemēram, nabadzību un invaliditāti. Šī pētījuma mērķis bija koncentrēties uz stratēģiju izpēti iemācītās bezpalīdzības mazināšanai angļu valodas apguves klasē, fokusējoties uz 8. klases skolēniem, par izvēlētajām metodēm izmantojot gadījumu izpēti un triangulāciju, apkopojot datus no stundu novērojumiem, skolēnu anketām un viņu darbiem, ja tādi bija, kā arī interviju ar skolotāju.

Atslēgvārdi: iemācīta bezpalīdzība, iemācītās bezpalīdzības samazināšanas stratēģijas, Martins Seligmans, angļu valodas apguve, valodu apguve klasē, 8. klase, valodu stundu plānošana

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1967, the world was first introduced to the fascinating prototype to the idea of learned helplessness, when Seligman and Overmier piloted a study examining how "dogs exposed to inescapable and unavoidable electric shocks in one situation later failed to learn to escape shock in a different situation where escape was possible" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 3). Afterwards, Seligman and Maier (1967) connected this effect with the concept of uncontrollability, and loss of control.

Seligman and Maier (1967) also described the motivational, cognitive and emotional effects of being exposed to uncontrollability. Uncontrollability impacts motivation, as dogs who have been exposed to unavoidable shocks did not attempt to find an escape route when encountering shocks in the future. It impacts cognitive abilities, since "exposure to uncontrollable events interferes with the organism's tendency to perceive contingent relationships between its behavior and outcomes" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 3), and that "uncontrollable aversive events produce greater emotional disruption than do controllable aversive events" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 3). Having control here is defined as "any time there is something the subject can do or refrain from doing that changes what it gets" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 5).

Seligman and Maier later repeated other types of experiments with different species to test this theory, for example, with college students who had to solve anagrams, where one set of students was exposed to a series of inescapable, loud noises, and the other was not. The other example entails rats placed in a shuttle box, one group previously exposed to inescapable electric shocks, and the other having never received electric shocks before (Price-Banks, 2020). Seligman and Maier (1976) noted that "debilitation of response initiation as a consequence of uncontrollable outcomes has been reported in cats, rats, mice, birds, primates, fish, and man, as well as in dogs" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 8), and that "the learned helplessness effect seems rather general among species that learn" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 8). In all cases, creatures who were exposed to failures before performed significantly worse, as the lack of correlation between their efforts and effect on the situation had conditioned them to avoid putting in their best efforts, or to abandon the tasks entirely (Price-Banks, 2020).

In future experiments, Seligman and Maier expanded the amount of control groups from two to three. Where before they had a group which had an outcome they could influence, and a group which had an outcome they could not, as pretreatment before the experiments, they now

included a group who had received no pretreatment before the experiment, positive or negative (Price-Banks, 2020).

Around 1976 is where the proper definition for learned helplessness was first formulated, as Maier and Seligman believed all the previously examined instances were "instances in which an organism has learned that outcomes are uncontrollable by his responses and is seriously debilitated by this knowledge" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 4), stating that, in essence, being exposed to uncontrollability makes creatures worse at using their abilities, even in dangerous situations.

Maier and Seligman (1976) went further, and stated that, when an organism experiences uncontrollable events, three deficits often ensue: motivational, cognitive, and emotional, and list three aspects:

a) "The motivation to respond in the face of later aversive events seems to wane" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 7),

b) "Even if the subject does respond and the response succeeds in producing relief, the subject often has difficulty learning that the response worked" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 7),

c) "Emotional balance may be distributed; depression and anxiety, measured in a variety of ways, may predominate" (Maier and Seligman, 1976: 7).

In the decades following their initial research, which introduced the concept to the world, learned helplessness has become an accepted term in the field of psychology, and, even outside of this field, is quite widely understood. It is also the main basis for several concepts in positive psychology.

Much more research in psychology and psychiatry has been done, examining both learned helplessness itself, and how it connects and influences other mental illnesses and aspects of human psyche. Seligman (Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale, 1978) himself developed a theory of depression, largely based on his previous research of learned helplessness. He outlined two types of learned helplessness – universal, where the person believes nothing can be done about their situation, and personal, where a person thinks solutions to a situation are possible, but that they personally are unable to solve the posed problems. Both of these types can lead to depression, and those who suffer from personal helplessness are also at risk for developing low self-esteem.

Seligman (Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale, 1978) also noted that helplessness is affected by generality (global and specific) and stability (chronic and transient). In essence, people who experience global helplessness (helplessness affecting multiple areas of life) and chronic helplessness (helplessness present for an extended period of time) are at higher risk for developing severe depression than those who experience specific helplessness (connected to one area of life) or transient helplessness (temporary or brief).

Seligman and Miller (1975), and Miller, Seligman, and Kurlander (1975) examined depression and learned helplessness in people, and so did Hiroto (1974). Klein, Fencil-Morse, and Seligman (1976) looked at learned helplessness, depression, and attribution of failure.

The work done by Seligman and colleagues outlines the cause of one type of depression, and even paves way to finding possible cures. They listed four strategies for treating helplessness-related depression (Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale, 1978):

a) Changing the likelihood of the outcome (adjusting the environment, and increasing the possibility of positive events and decreasing the possibility of negative events),
b) Reducing the want for preferred outcomes (reducing the negative perception of undesired events, and the positivity of unattainable events),
c) Changing expectations (making people realize what is within their control),
d) Changing unrealistic expectations for failure or success.

Other research of psychology continued examining learned helplessness, and how it connects to other areas of psychology. Research has discovered that learned helplessness tends to crop up in disadvantaged groups, for example, the elderly (Foy and Mitchell, 1990), the poor (Brown, Seyler, Knorr, Garnett and Laurenceau, 2016), the mentally unwell, students (Raufelder, Regner and Wood, 2018), racial minorities, especially in academic settings (Salami, Walker and Beach 2017), and more.

Furthermore, not only are certain groups more vulnerable to learned helplessness, learned helplessness is also likely to cause further issues. Besides depression, learned helplessness can worsen negative health symptoms and a person's perception about their illness (Nowicka-Sauer, Hajduk, Kujawska-Danecka, Banaszkiewicz, Czuszyńska, Smoleńska and Siebert, 2017); can lead to maladaptive perfectionism (Filippello, Larcan, Sorrenti, Buzzai, Orecchio and Costa, 2017); can cause burnout, emotional exhaustion, cynicism, nihilistic perspective, and hopelessness (Tayfur et al., 2013); and worsening of phobias, depression, anxiety, isolation, shyness and loneliness

(Cherry, 2017). Social issues contribute to learned helplessness as well – "gender, unemployment, financial difficulties, insufficient social support, substance abuse, violence, and bullying are strongly associated with poor mental wellbeing. Some of the psychological factors associated with mental wellbeing include exposure to psychologically traumatic events, willingness to disclose emotional status and psychological factors of stigma by association" (Ogoma, 2019: 391).

Of course, learned helplessness deeply impacts not only the field of psychology, but also the field of education. Ogoma (2019) states that "learned helplessness should be of interest to educators due to its indirect association with the deleterious academic outcomes" (Ogoma, 2019: 392). There is a lot of discussion and research into how academic failure or self-esteem can impact learning, as well as future success, especially as learned helplessness can lead to a cycle of poor performance – students who feel like they cannot succeed do not put in effort into their work, which leads to poor grades, which leads to even less effort and motivation. Price-Banks (2020) also adds that impact of stress on the human body can be devastating over time, and that not supporting students enough can lead not only to poor academic performance, but to poor health as well, and that "the lack of support for a student with learned helplessness may adversely impact them further" (Price-Banks, 2020: 21).

Ogoma (2019) states that mental wellbeing and academic performance are closely linked. "Mental wellbeing is a dynamic state of the mind," (Ogoma, 2019: 391) they state, and "it determines how we feel and express the feelings, associate with others, realize our own potentials and be productive in our community, and cope with the normal stresses of day-to-day life" (Ogoma, 2019: 391). As part of our daily duty, school is a pivotal environment for a person's development, and managing learned helplessness is vital, since "general poor mental health, depression, anxiety and eating disorder are strongly associated with lower academic achievement and higher probability of dropping out of school" (Ogoma, 2019: 391), and "mental health problems lead to social consequences (i.e., attention problems, delinquency and substance abuse) which in turn cause diminished academic achievement" (Ogoma, 2019: 391).

Price-Banks (2020) states that "those who experience learned helplessness stop trying to achieve success after desired outcomes are not achieved following repeated failed attempts" (Price-Banks, 2020: 20), and gives a specific example:

> "A students' repeated failure on a test after several attempts at passing, for example, may evoke negative emotions towards the process of test taking or the subject matter overall. These negative feelings may include increased stress, sadness, hopelessness

> or even depression. This adverse reaction may perhaps result in a student losing motivation to study or making any fruitful attempts to do better on an upcoming exam. They may feel nothing they do will change the outcome."
> (Price-Banks, 2020: 20)

There is no shortage of wonderful research available when it comes to investigating education and learned helplessness. Steinberg (1987) contributed to the field by looking at how learned helplessness relates to paranoia in college students, noting how standard medication procedures do not work with patients with helplessness-induced paranoia. Salami, Walker and Beach (2017) compared helplessness and hopelessness as cognitive vulnerabilities in black and white students. Sideridis (2003) noticed helpless behavior in children with learning disabilities. Al-Harthi (2020) looked at the connection between learned helplessness and social skills in students with learning disabilities. Ogoma (2019) investigated various parenting styles, and how they affected learned helplessness in learning mathematics in various regions and across genders.

Cakir (2014) looked how underachievements of gifted students impacted their attitudes towards their school environments. Price-Banks (2020) examined learned helplessness in first-year community college students, particularly, ones majoring in STEM fields. She was interested to see if learned helplessness contributes to the low retention rates among the students majoring in STEM fields. Mohagheghi and Sadeghi (2017) examined the relation between educational neglect and learned helplessness.

The aim of this research paper is to contribute to this vast amount of research by testing various strategies of mitigating learned helplessness in an English language-learning classroom, in particular, focusing on grade 8 students at a school in Jurmala, Latvia. The chosen research methods are a case study, and triangulation – the research will gather data from teacher observations, students' work collected during the lesson (if any), student surveys, as well as an interview with a teacher.

Chapter 1 will explain learned helplessness, and chapter 2 will continue by examining its causes and effects, as well as methods for mitigation. Chapter 3 will describe the case study data, the results of the initial survey, the lesson plans used, and analyze the available data. Chapter 4 will contain the analysis of a teacher interview, and chapter 5 will present relevant conclusions.

The research questions are formulated as follows:

1) What are the suggested strategies and advice for managing learned helplessness?

2) What were the students' responses and reactions to the lessons developed based on recommended advice?

The research objectives:

1) To examine previous research on learned helplessness, looking at definitions, causes and effects;
2) To examine strategies and advice for reducing learned helplessness;
3) To prepare and carry out lessons based on those strategies;
4) To collect data from lessons and student questionnaires;
5) To carry out a case study, and perform the analysis of the results;
6) To interview a language teacher, to get their perspective on this issue;
7) To draw appropriate conclusions.

2. LEARNED HELPLESSNESS: CAUSES, EFFECTS, AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES WHILE WORKING IN A CLASSROOM

Cherry (2017) gives a more modern definition for learned helplessness, describing it as "a phenomenon observed in both humans and other animals when they have been conditioned to expect pain, suffering, or discomfort without a way to escape it" (Cherry, 2017). Price-Banks (2020) defines it as "behavioral changes that occur from exposure to the perception of uncontrollable stress or adversity" (Price-Banks, 2020: 17).

Cherry (2017) notes that this phenomenon is not a natural or innate trait in creatures capable of learning – in general, people (and other creatures) do not start life thinking that they lack control over what happens to them. This is a learned behavior, conditioned by negative experience. Ogoma (2019) adds that "people develop the sense of learned-helplessness when subjected to uncontrollable and aversive experiences and learn to be helpless in similar situations even when the experiences are controllable" (Ogoma, 2019: 392).

2.1 Causes and effects

Learned helplessness was found to be influenced by many different factors – basically, certain groups of people were found to be more vulnerable to developing learned helplessness. Those are usually groups of people who are disadvantaged in some way – socially, financially, and so on. Such groups include:

a) The elderly, who, due to their old age, are more likely to experience negative changes, illnesses, physical or mental decline, loss of loved ones, and change of living arrangements (Foy and Mitchell, 1990),
b) People affected by various types of stress, but especially poverty-related stress (Brown, Seyler, Knorr, Garnett and Laurenceau, 2016),
c) People with mental illnesses and disorders – people with autism, ADHD, depression, anxiety, various personality disorders, general poor mental health, and eating disorders (Ogoma, 2019),
d) People who suffer from gender discrimination, unemployment, financial difficulties, insufficient social support, substance abuse, violence, and bullying (Ogoma, 2019),
e) Racial minorities (Salami, Walker and Beach, 2017),

f) Students, who are stressed about their academic performance (Raufelder, Regner and Wood, 2018), and many more.

Leaving learned helplessness unmitigated is dangerous, as it can leave already vulnerable groups at risk of academic failure. It creates a cycle of students feeling unable to achieve their goals, thus losing motivation to put in effort in their schoolwork, which leads to poor performances at school, which leads to even less motivation and effort. Heilman (2021) mentions that "children with learned helplessness may grow into adults who in many ways do not possess the necessary skills to be successful in society" (Heilman, 2021: 2).

2.2 Strategies for managing learned helplessness in the classroom

Price-Banks (2020), who looked into ways of increasing student retention rates in STEM fields, notes that "through positive psychological interventions a person may overcome learned helplessness behaviors by taking on learned optimism/coping skills" (Price-Banks, 2020: 21).

As examples, she mentions that including connections between classmates (for example, pair work, group discussions, or study groups) will help students who struggle with learned helplessness, as it provides valuable support, and teaches resilience to adversity, as well as social skills. She also states that teacher observations "to identify when a student is feeling left behind (i.e., repeated failures on course assessment markers)" (Price-Banks, 2020: 21) are also vital for noticing and preventing learned helplessness early.

Seligman (2018) himself lists more strategies, as part of his theory of learned optimism. He writes that there are several benefits of teaching more optimistic thinking, namely, improved health, both physical and mental, increase in motivation, and decrease in stress levels. According to Seligman (2018), optimists tend to view adversities as temporary, blame external forces (not themselves) for failures or mistakes, and they do not let failures in one area of life impact the rest. His approach, based on cognitive-behavioural techniques and rational emotive behavioral therapy, is known as the ABCDE model, where A stands for adversity, B for belief, C for consequence, D for disputation, and E for energization.

He notes that it is important for students to receive praise, both for their abilities and efforts, for instance, praising a student for being knowledgeable in a subject, or stating that their hard work has paid off. He also mentions that goal-setting (making students realize that their desired

outcomes are realistic and thus attainable) is necessary in the learning process, as well as teachers creating a positive environment by valuing their students' input.

Miller (2015) recommends creating learning resources, to motivate students to understand that failure is to be accepted a part of the learning process, and to seek out answers on their own, using the available resources. It is important for students to realize that failure is vital to the process of learning, and that their teacher will be there to support them. He also recommends to avoid giving students answers when they are stuck, and to encourage using questions that prompt the students to think independently.

3. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Part of this research was examining empirical data collected from the students throughout several lessons. The empirical data was collected throughout the second semester. The class has 16 students, 8 boys and 8 girls, most of whom have studied English at school for 8 years, since grade 1. The data consists of my own observations of their performance during the class, students' work submissions (if any were required), and their responses to a survey given after each lesson.

3.1 Initial overview of the students

It is possible to divide the students into several groups, according to their observed behavior.

I would define group one as "high grades and good comprehension of English, but quiet and rather unwilling to participate in class activities, especially groupwork". This group of students always get good grades on their assignments, and are, in general, responsible about their schoolwork, however, they tend to be the quiet types. They rarely take the initiative to answer questions addressed to the whole class, and can sometimes be caught doing something else, instead of the required classwork. When asked why, they respond that they do tasks better at home (which, in all fairness, they do complete at home).

Student A, in particular, is very aversive to work in class. She is incredibly quiet, and rather rough towards her classmates – she is quite sharp in her manner of speech, and is driven towards efficiency. Very often, if given a group assignment, she will complete her work first, or get annoyed with her groupmates getting distracted or unfocused, and take the initiative to complete the work first. She performs the best in individual work (when she desires to do any work at all), and is best at writing essays or working with text. Her written submissions always receive either a 9 or a 10, since she is argumentative and expressive when using her preferred mode of communication.

This student mainly uses school as a break from her home life – her relationship with her parents is rather strained, so school is a place where she seeks a moment of peace. It is rather difficult for her, since the class is very turbulent, especially during the breaks, so both home and school end up being stressful environments for her.

Student B has high English proficiency, and she is open about her favourite hobbies being creative endeavours. She writes and reads a lot, and, in general, is confident in her English skills.

However, she has social anxiety, and, as a result, often avoids speaking up in class, because she is often interrupted or drowned out by some of her less polite classmates. She has previously

stated her annoyance with her classmates, saying that she dislikes how she cannot focus because of them being noisy, and how stressful it makes an otherwise good class.

Student O is quite antisocial – he does not like interacting with his classmates much, so he dislikes groupwork. He only tolerates groupwork if he is paired with students N or B. He especially dislikes being near student L or student C. He is also fond of finding excuses to avoid doing classwork, or do it with the least amount of effort possible. He is, in general, unmotivated, both in school and outside of school, and his mother is looking into the option of getting him a therapist.

I would have to classify the next group as "have fine English skills, and get good grades, but are open about their disinterest in the subject". What characterizes this group more than anything else is overconfidence – they think that they either do not need to improve their English skills any more (because there are more important things to focus on for them), or they think there is not much room for improvement for them left.

Student E does not really care about most school subjects besides math, computer science, and sports, and is quite open about his disinterest. He considers his English to be fine (and he is correct in his assessment), so he does not see the point in doing tasks or activities to raise his level of proficiency. The only thing that works to motivate him participate is a graded assignment.

Student M is similarly dismissive, although, in her case, it is not because she is interested in other subjects more. As I am able to tell from speaking with other colleagues, she does not care much for other subjects as well. This student spends most of her summers in the UK or abroad, visiting her family, and has attended international schools before, so she is very confident in her English. While she turns her assignments in on time, as is rarely noisy enough to be disruptive of others' work, she also does not participate much in activities, besides occasionally answering open discussion questions presented to the class.

Group three would be what I would call "students at the expected language level". This group of students speak English fine, they are at the language proficiency level expected of them at this stage, and they are involved with classwork. While they sometimes get distracted by other classmates, overall, they are the best performing group when it comes to completing assignment and participating in class.

Student D performs excellently in all subjects, with English being no exception. She is hard-working and diligent. Her main drawback is being seated next to her friends, students M and P, who distract her.

Student G is a diligent boy who is not distracted by his classmates much. He is capable of both individual and group work, although he prefers working in pairs. He is attentive in class, and tends to be the group leader when required to work in groups with other students.

Student I is easily distracted, she often spends time doodling or writing in class. However, she likes collaborating with others, and, in general, performs well in teams – it is helpful to have someone working with her to keep her on track. She often works with student B, since student B is anxious, but good at staying focused on the task, and student I gets easily distracted.

Student J is another one who gets easily distracted, especially if student C is in class. They do not have a good relationship, and student J has stated before that he dislikes him a lot. They gets into arguments if both of them are in class, and time has to be spent to calm them both down. However, he has strict parents, which means he does all of his schoolwork, and tries to participate in class, even if student C is there.

Group four would be students with mental illnesses and learning hindrances. Both of them get decent grades, but there are issues when working with them.

Student L, who is talkative and polite, really enjoys English lessons, but has issues focusing. He is diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety. Breaking down his initial barriers is a challenge.

A similar situation is with student P – she is diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and sometimes has breakdowns in class. I often have to let her go home earlier, or skip the class.

The last group could be described as “students who language level is below the expected”. This group frequently asks for additional help during lessons, have to be seated next to classmates who are willing to assist them, or they abandon tasks that they find too difficult. These students do not use English as much in their daily life, in comparison to other classmates – these students come from Russian-speaking families, which means that they mainly speak Russian at home, and use social media in Russian, while the other classmates often speak with each other in English.

Student H is a hard-working girl whose language level is close to being adequate for her age – she requires vocabulary expansion. She feels nervous speaking in class, since she thinks she has a heavy accent. She takes after school classes to improve her English, and comes to my consultation hours.

Student K freely admits that her English is not great, and she is seated next to students D and M, who try to help her. She often requests easier tasks to complete, fearing to even try the tasks of the level she is supposed to be at. She is also frequently ill, and missed a lot of lessons.

Student F is rather uncaring about his work – he sits next to student C, who is often a bad influence on him. He often skips school, and avoids participating in classes. He is more active when paired with someone else, however, it is only possible to do so when student C is absent, since pairing student F with someone means student C will also have to be paired with someone else.

Lastly, student C is the main problem student in this class. His English knowledge is low, to the point where he struggles to understand basic sentences. He views going to school as an annoyance, and has neither the interest nor respect to participate in studying. During lessons, he walks around the school, plays on his phone, talks loudly to his friend (student F), bothers other classmates, and interrupts teachers.

Several groups out of my students are at risk for developing learned helplessness, and I believe many already have. While I am not qualified to diagnose them, many sources mentioned in chapter 1 say that people with mental illnesses, confidence issues, past traumas, anxiety, can develop learned helplessness if these issues are not mitigated.

3.2 Lesson plans

Based on the advice examined in Chapter 1 of this paper, I developed several lessons in various styles.

The overarching theme of the 4 lessons was heroism, and hero's journey. It was important to me that all four lessons are connected with the same topic, as I did not want to waste time introducing a new topic each time, but rather work off of the fact that my students already have a basic understanding of the topic. I introduced the students to the idea behind the hero's journey, and their task across the four lessons was to divide themselves into two groups, piece together a fairytale, read it, divide the roles, decide what creative changes they would make to it, and put together a short performance.

Each lesson and my observations will be described below. Students were also given a questionnaire to fill after each lesson, to check how much they remember, as well as how they felt. Before any of the lessons, students were given an initial survey, to determine the baseline of how

the students feel during the lessons, and to follow Seligman's (2018) advice on teacher's being receptive to students' ideas, thus creating a safe learning environment.

3.2.1 Initial survey

Before proceeding with the lessons, the students were given an initial survey to complete (Appendix 1), to establish a baseline of how they feel in the English classroom, and to monitor how that opinion changes throughout the lessons. Out of the 16 students in the class, 15 completed this survey, as student L was ill, and was not able to participate in the survey.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections – one asking about the class environment, and the other about their language abilities and preferred activities.

The first section is about the class environment, and it has six questions. To start, I asked the students how they feel when they have to work in class.

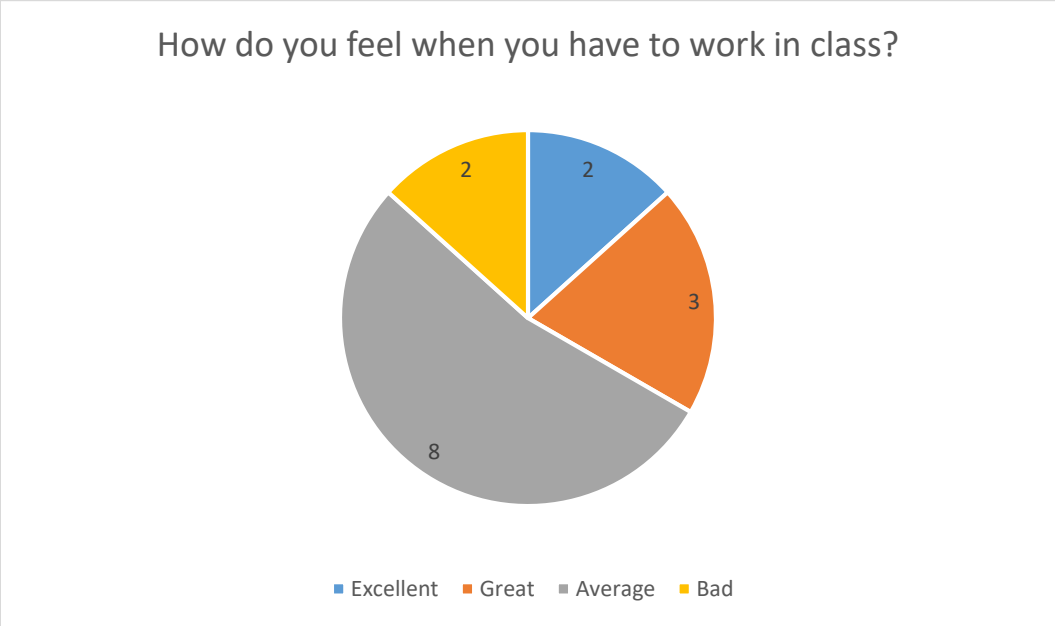


Figure 3.2.1.1 How do you feel when you have to work in class?

Most students (8) answered that they feel alright, normal, or fine, represented on the chart as "average". Three of them said that they feel great, however, some of them mentioned that it is distracting when their classmates are noisy. Two of them noted that it is their favourite class, so they feel excellent. Two students answered that they feel bad, although one of them did not elaborate, and the other said that they feel bad most of the time. It must be noted that this student has diagnosed depression.

Next, I asked if the environment mostly help them learn, or hinders them.

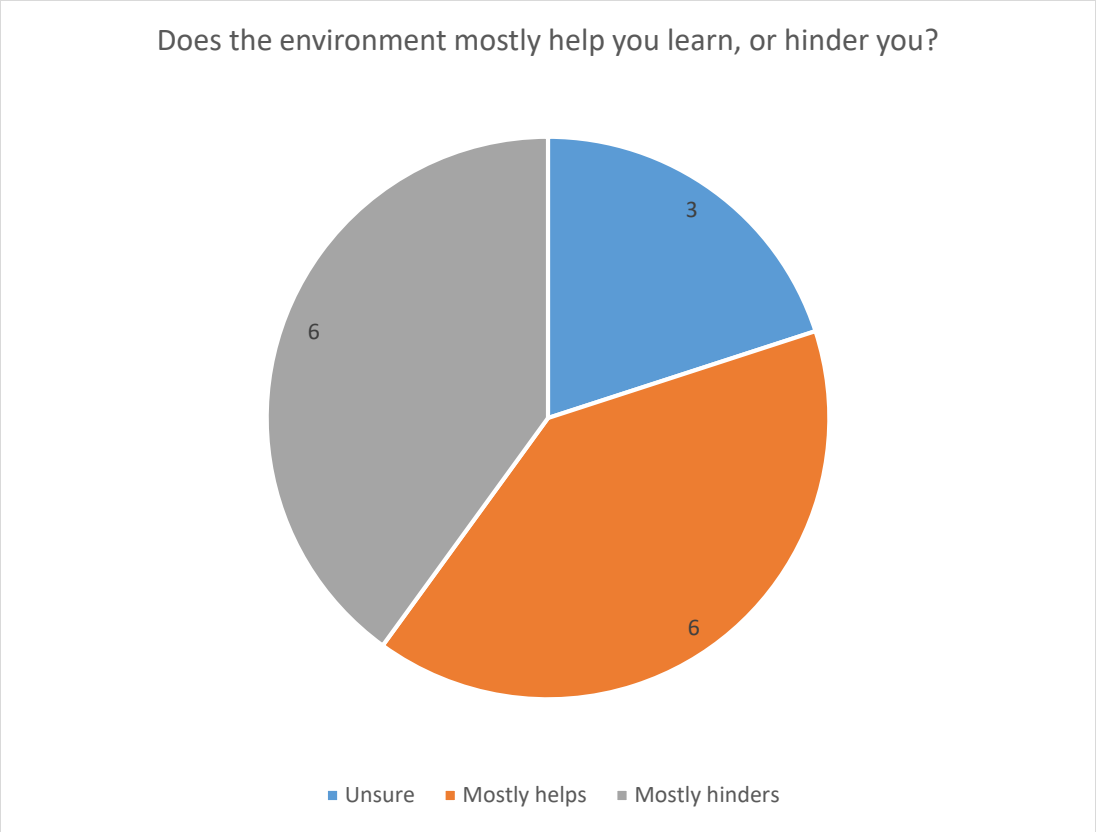


Figure 3.2.1.2 Does the environment mostly help you learn, or hinder you?

The class was almost equally divided on this question. Six of them answered that they feel hindered in class, and six answered that the class environment mostly helps them. Three of them were unsure, or said that it changes depending on the day.

It is interesting to note members of all three groups mentioned the same reason why they sometimes feel hindered – the presence of students C and F. They often argue with the rest of the class, behave noisily and disrespectfully, and disturb other students during the learning process. Some even noted that the class would otherwise be fine if not for these two students.

The next two question were asked for students to be able to explain further what influenced their answer in question two. Question three is “what helps you learn during class?”, and question four is “what hinders you?”.

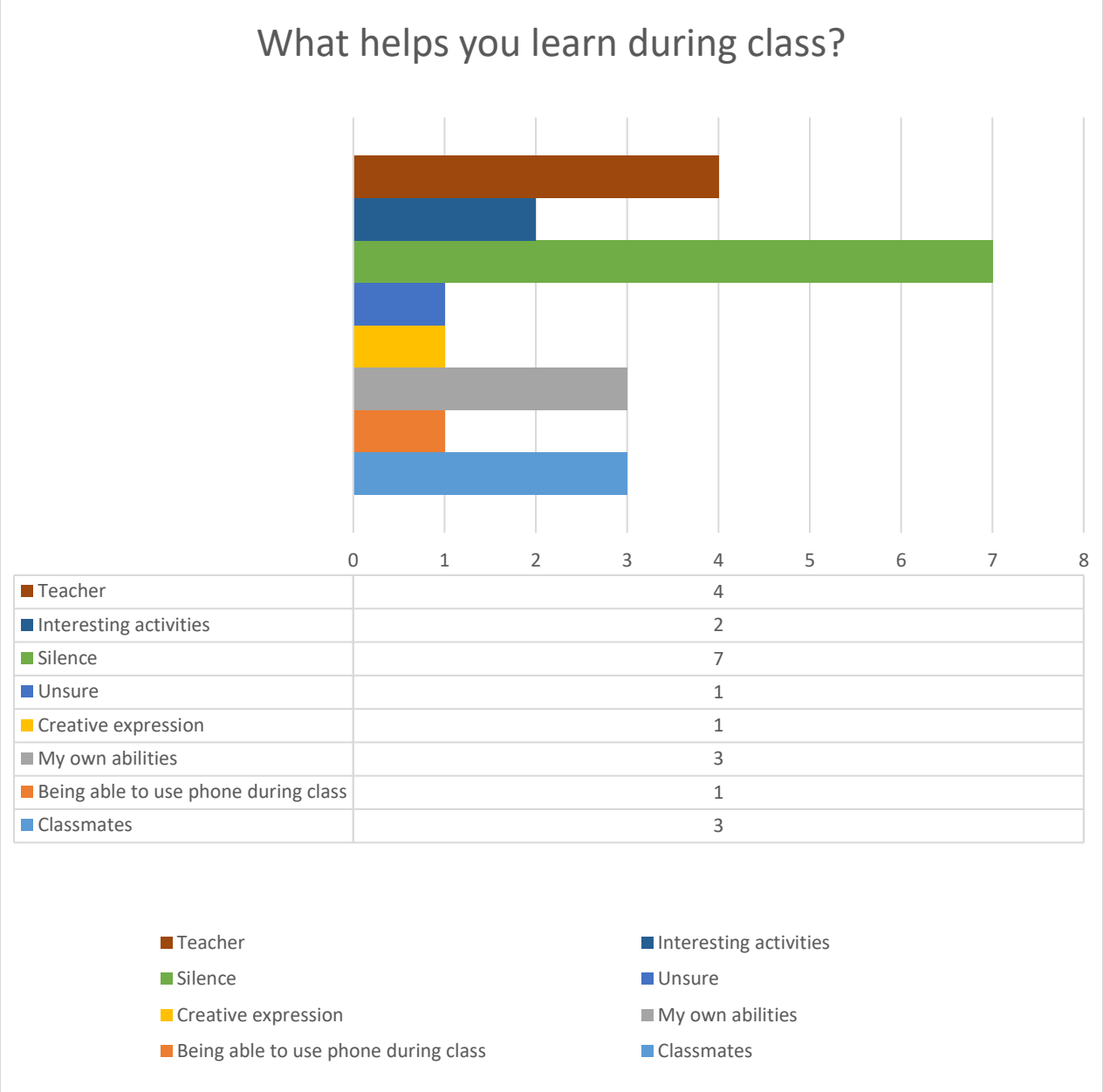


Figure 3.2.1.3 What helps you learn during class?

Since this was an open-ended question, students were able to list several things that help them. Seven of them mentioned that they really value peace and silence, as it helps them focus on the lesson and the tasks. Four of them mentioned that I as a teacher am helpful. Three students mentioned that their own abilities and confidence help them during class, and three also mentioned that their classmates help them, and are fun to work with. Two students mentioned enjoying interesting activities. One student was unsure, one likes creative expression, and one likes when they are allowed to use phones during class, for example, to listen to music or play Kahoot.

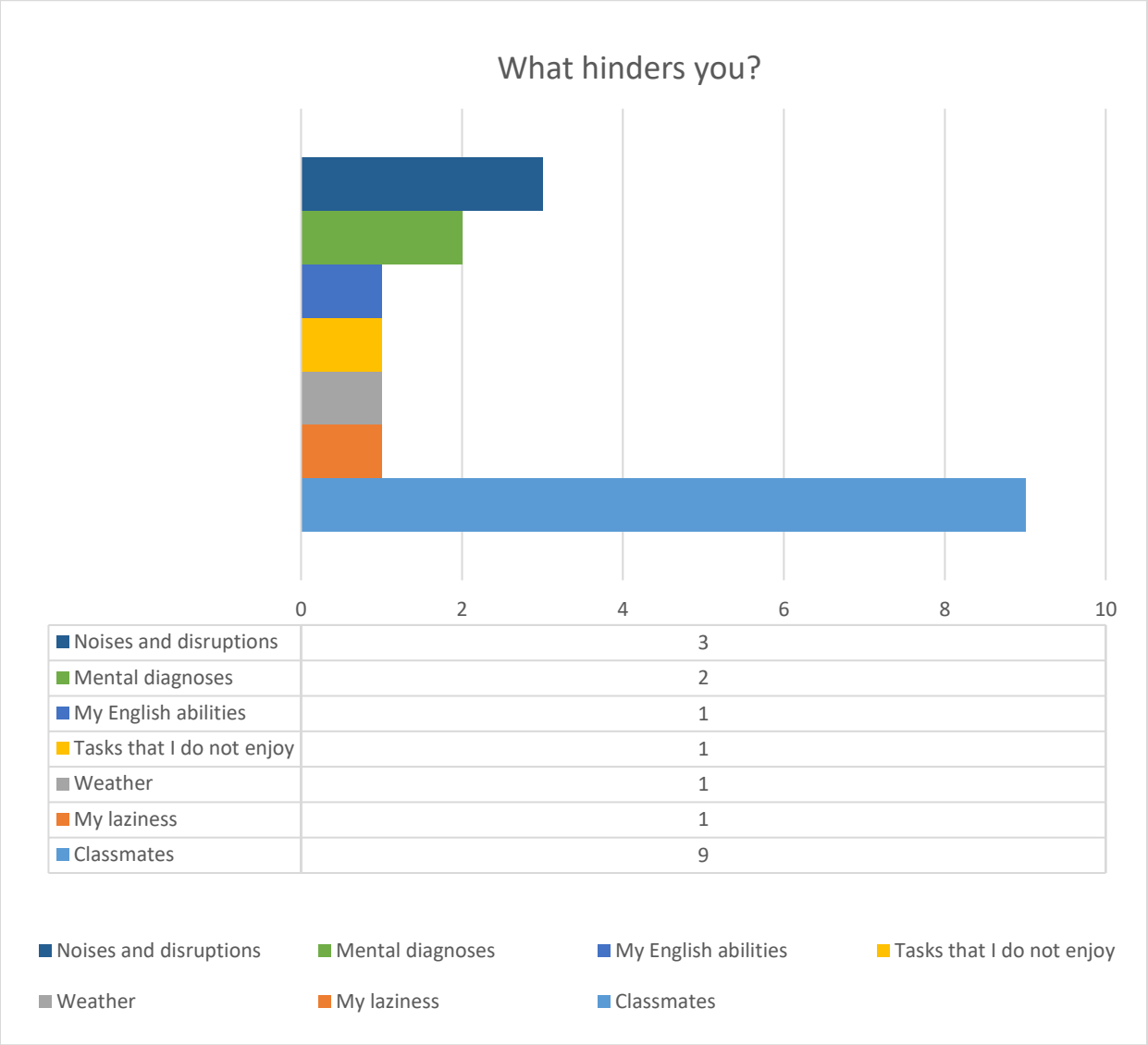
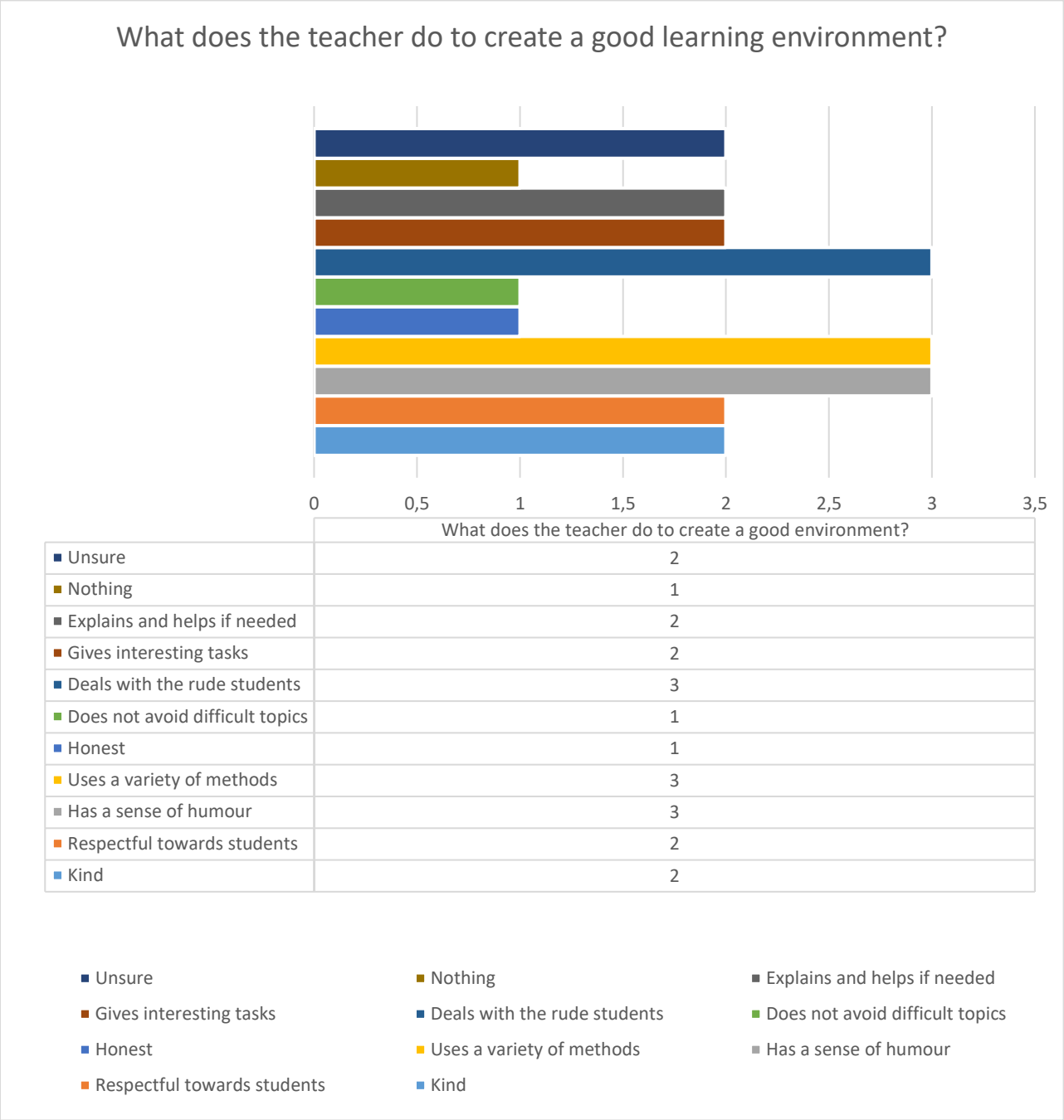


Figure 3.2.1.4 What hinders you?

The answers in this question correlate a lot with the answers in the previous one. Considering how many of them value peace and quiet, it is not surprising that the majority (9) mentioned rude classmates (once again naming students F and C), and noise and disturbance. Some admitted that their own mental issues, like depression and anxiety, hinder their performance in class. Student E admitted his own laziness, and student M mentioned that she does not like writing too much. Student G said that he is distracted by the location of the class, as the sunlight makes the class too warm and bright, so it is hard to see the screen of the projector, and thus harder to

follow along with the lesson. Student K said that her English is poor, so she finds it difficult to keep up with the rest of the class.



	What does the teacher do to create a good environment?
Unsure	2
Nothing	1
Explains and helps if needed	2
Gives interesting tasks	2
Deals with the rude students	3
Does not avoid difficult topics	1
Honest	1
Uses a variety of methods	3
Has a sense of humour	3
Respectful towards students	2
Kind	2

Figure 3.2.1.5 What does the teacher do to create a good learning environment?

The responses for this question were both interesting and flattering, as my students have many positive things to say about my approach to teacher. A lot of them seem to enjoy my personality – for them, it matters that I am honest (1), kind (2), I do not shy away from discussing

controversial or difficult topics (1), and that I have a good sense of humor (3). Some value my attitude towards my students – I believe that my students are intelligent and full of potential, so I treat them respectfully, which was noted by two students. Others appreciate my teaching style, that I try various types of lessons (3), I give interesting tasks and projects to complete (2), and that I never refuse additional explanations or help to those who need it (2). Three students liked that I deal with problem students efficiently (3), two students were unsure what to respond, and one student, regrettably, replied that I contribute nothing to the class learning environment.

The last question in this section is whether or not my students ever feel anxious in my class, and why.

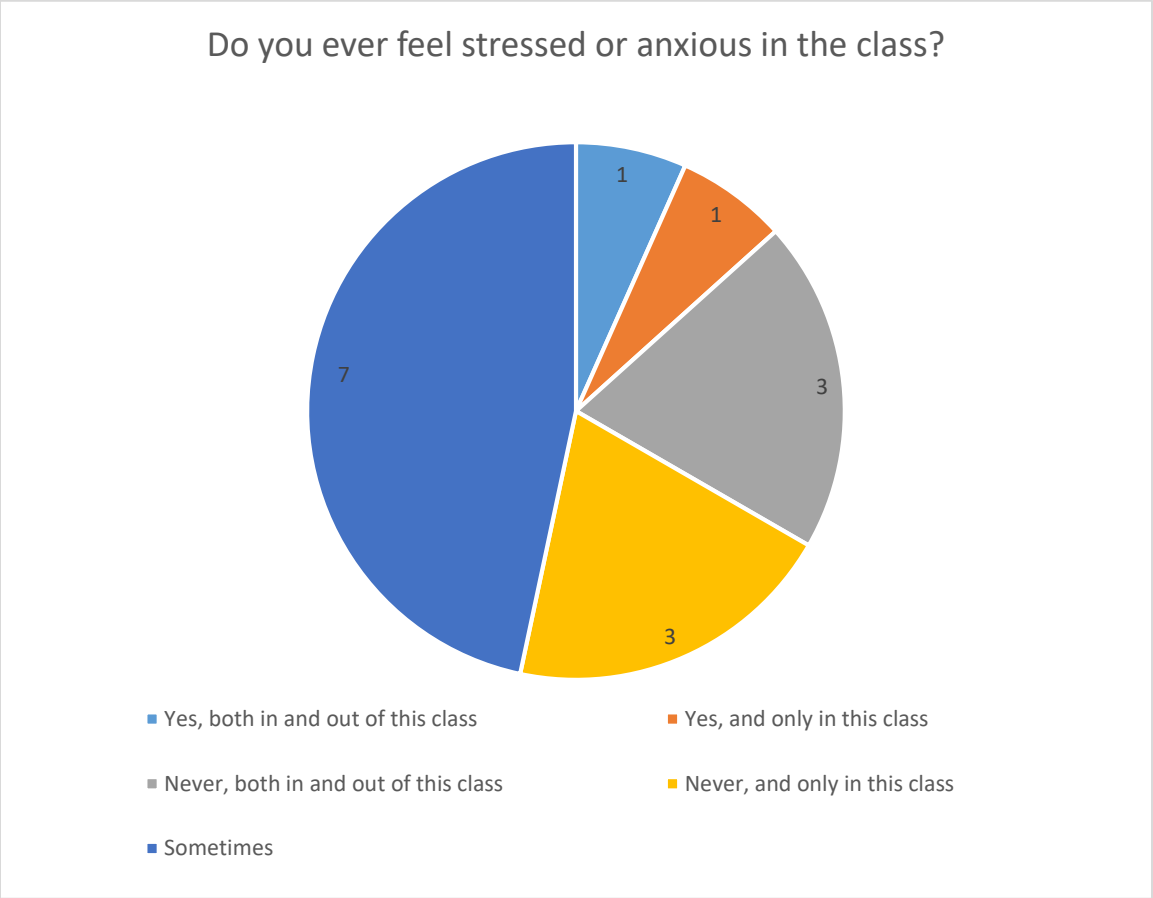


Figure 3.2.1.6 Do you ever feel stressed or anxious in the class?

Most students (7) feel temporary stress depending on the situation in class. They feel stressed when their classmates are disturbing them or too noisy, when a teacher is upset, when they have to prepare for tests or presentations, or when there is too much classwork. One student reported that they have diagnosed anxiety, so they always feel anxious, both in this class and outside of this class. One student, student K, who has issues with her English skills, admits that

she only feels anxious in this class, because it is a stressful environment for her. Three students never feel anxious, in this class or otherwise, and three of them admit to being anxious, though almost never in my class. These students feel comfortable in their own abilities, and enjoy participating in class.

The second section of the survey, titled "language abilities and activities", contains eight questions. These questions are designed to allow students describe their English skills, as well as indicate their preferred activities in class.

The first question explains that the language skills are typically divided into speaking, listening, writing and reading, and asks which one the students think they are the best at, and give some reasons why. Since this is an open-ended question, the students were mention more than one skill.

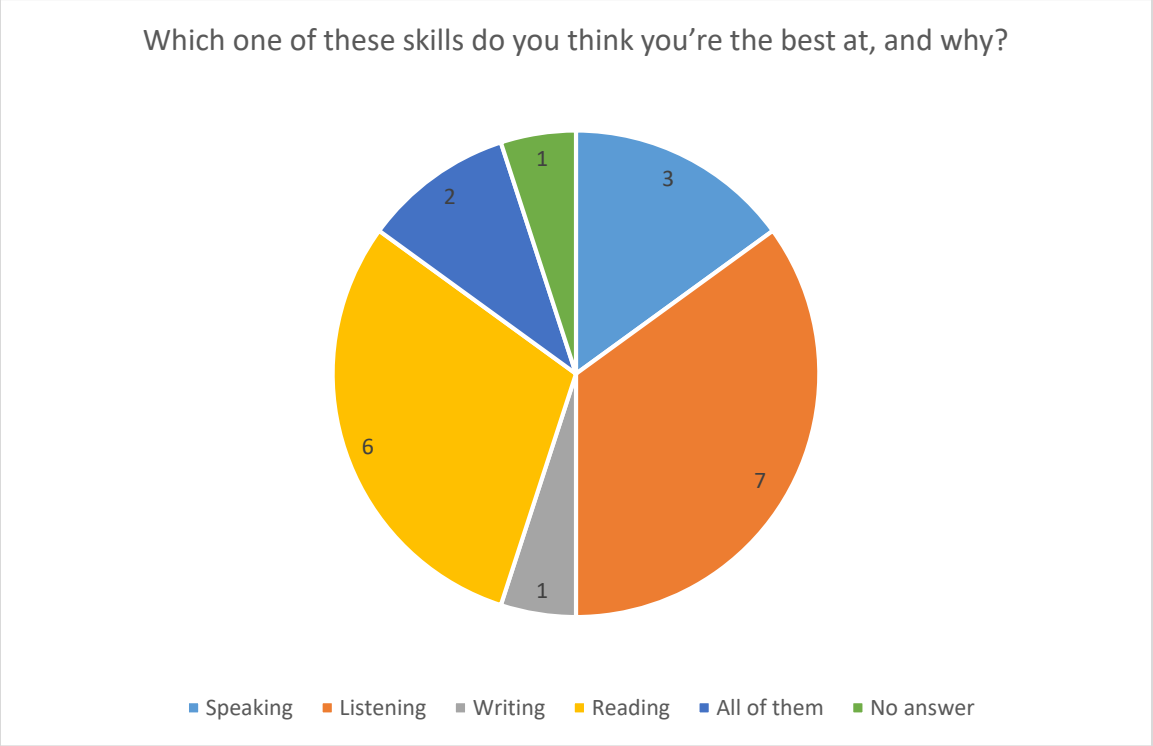


Figure 3.2.1.7 Which one of these skills do you think you're the best at, and why?

Overwhelmingly, the students responded that their best skill is their listening ability (7). Perhaps this might explain why they are so fond of silence and peace during class, as they rely on their ability to focus and hear. They say that they practice listening the most, by having conversations in English with others, listening to music, and watching English media, like films or TV shows.

The next group are the students who think reading is their best skill, and there are six of them. Those are the students who enjoy reading, and frequently read outside of class as well.

Three students consider speaking their strongest skill. They prefer oral communication, and, in general, are quite talkative. Meanwhile, only one person considers writing their strongest skill, as they enjoy writing essays the most, and they get good grades for essays. Two students consider themselves good at all of these skills, stating that they get good grades no matter what the assignment is, and one student left this question blank.

The next question asks the opposite – which one of these did they find the most challenging, and why? This is also an open-ended question, which means the students were able to indicate several skills.

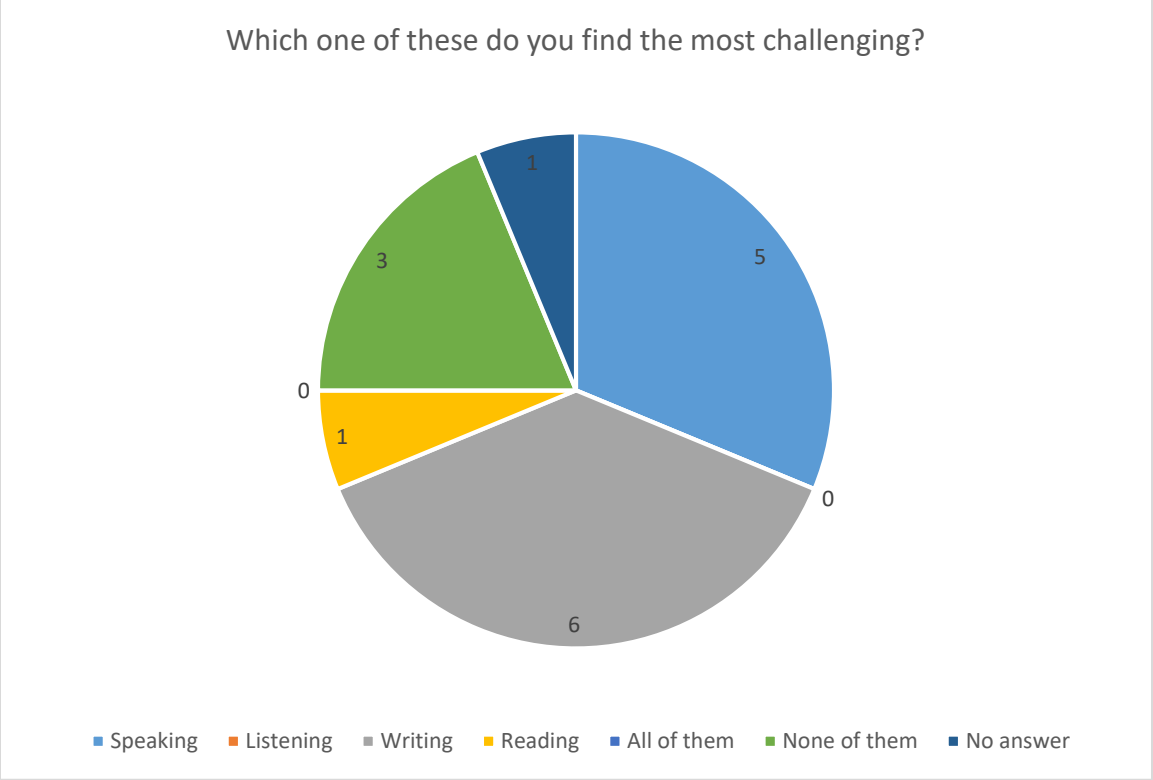


Figure 3.2.1.8 Which one of these do you find the most challenging?

Writing was the most indicated challenging skill by students – six of them said that they struggle with writing. Some of them find it too much effort or exhausting, some dislike thinking about grammar, some think they have poor penmanship, and some admit they are too lazy to practice it.

The next group are the students who find speaking challenging (5). As their reasons, they list having anxiety, feeling uncomfortable with speaking at the front of the class, self-consciousness about their pronunciation, and issues organizing a speech logically.

Three students said they find none of these skills too challenging, one person found reading challenging, and one person left the question unanswered. There were no students who listed listening as their problem area, and no students said that they are bad at all of them.

Next, I wanted the students to give reasons why some people may struggle to learn languages. The students mentioned this as reasons:

a) Having unpleasant or unskilled teachers,
b) It is challenging to learn new vocabulary and grammar,
c) Difficult spelling,
d) Distracting environment,
e) Lack of effort,
f) People do not like the language, but are forced to learn it (by parents or at school, for example),
g) Having mental issues or disabilities,
h) People attempt self-study of a language, not knowing how to learn properly.

To help me understand the best activities to develop the lesson plans, I asked the students to describe their perfect lesson. The activities listed were:

a) Watching a movie,
b) Group discussion,
c) Creative work (fiction writing, art, etc.),
d) Book reading and analysis,
e) Group projects,
f) Playing Kahoot, or another game,
g) Listening to a presentation,
h) Be allowed to eat snacks during a class.

In order to cover activities that might not have been listed by my students, question eleven prompts them to rate a list of activities by how much they would enjoy doing them. They were asked to rate the activities from 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest score, and 10 being the highest score. X marks the lack of data, either because the student was not present, or left the question blank.

Student	Non-digital games	Storytelling	Singing	Pair work	Group discussion	Digital games	Individual creative work	Worksheets with tasks	Roleplay/ Theatre performance
Student A	7	9	4	2	3	9	6	10	3
Student B	8	9	5	7	6	9	10	4	7
Student C	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student D	7	9	9	8	8	9	8	6	10
Student E	10	8	1	8	8	5	1	1	5
Student F	10	1	1	8	9	10	3	9	1
Student G	8	8	2	9	8	9	8	5	6
Student H	10	9	7	6	6	5	7	7	1
Student I	8	6	7	3	5	8	9	7	4
Student J	9	7	1	5	7	10	8	2	9
Student K	5	1	5	5	2	6	1	1	5
Student L	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student M	7	10	7	7	6	7	7	6	8
Student N	8	8	5	8	7	9	8	7	2
Student O	5	5	1	2	3	9	7	2	1
Student P	9	10	10	2	9	1	8	4	9
Average score:	**7,92**	**7,14**	**4,64**	**5,71**	**6,21**	**7,5**	**6,5**	**5,07**	**5,07**

Table 3.2.1.1 Student rating of various possible activities

Looking at the data, it is clear that students have a preference for games, as both non-digital and digital games scored the highest. Students also enjoy the thought of storytelling, as well as group discussion and individual creative work, as those are next highest scoring categories.

Singing is the lowest scoring category, I would have to assume due to most of the students not having much musical talent, and being anxious about performing in the class. Pair work is done quite often in this class, so perhaps the students want a change of pace. Worksheets with tasks appeal to some of the students, but most of them find that activity boring. Roleplays or theatre performances have never been done with this class before, hence the students do not know what to expect of them.

Based on this, it is possible to gather some ideas for lessons. Digital games are not possible to do with them, as their class does not have a working computer, and other classrooms are unavailable, and I will omit singing, as it is the lowest scoring category.

After this, I asked if they enjoyed learning languages, and why or why not.

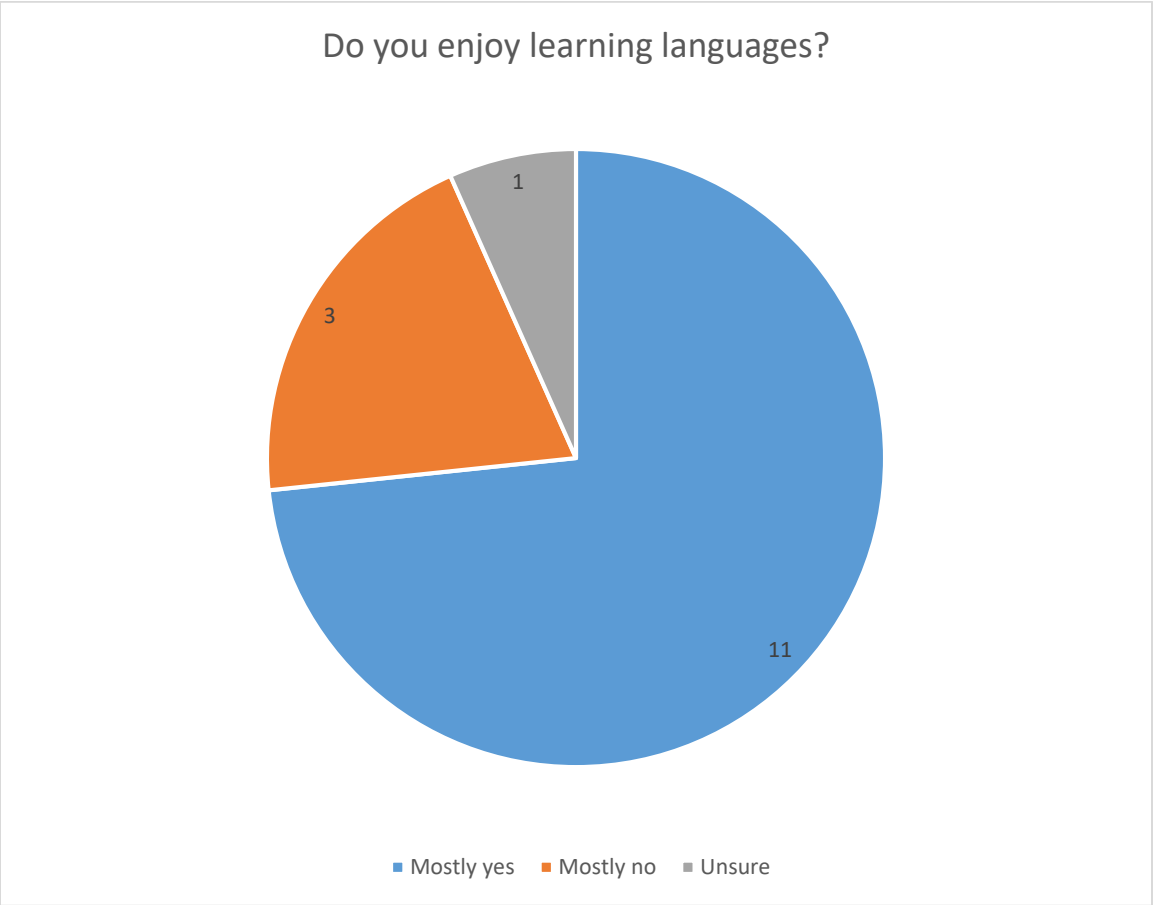


Figure 3.2.1.9 Do you enjoy learning languages?

Most of the students (11) answered with "yes", however, many also noted it depends on the teacher, and on the language. An example that many brought up is the fact that they dislike Russian (the other foreign language they have to learn at school), and that they do not like their Russian teacher.

Those who answered that they do not like learning languages (3) state that they find them too boring, that they enjoy other subjects more, or that their teachers are too strict. One person was unsure in their response.

This leads into the next question – whether they feel anxiety or stress in a language-learning classroom. Here, the students once again mention the Russian lessons, and their Russian teacher –

while the majority of them felt comfortable in English classes, they have issues with other teachers in other language classes.

Finally, I asked them what their English teacher (me) does to make them less anxious during language learning, and they gave several observations:

a) The teacher translates and helps understand vocabulary and the tasks,
b) The teacher tries to pay attention to all of the students,
c) The teacher calms down the class when needed,
d) The teacher offers varied activities,
e) The teacher listens to the recommendations of the students,
f) The teacher stops peer pressure,
g) The teacher is humorous,
h) The teacher makes the students feel safe.

Overall, this initial survey was incredibly useful. It gave me valuable insight into my students' preferences and thoughts, as well as their opinions, which was incredibly helpful when designing the lesson plans and activities for them.

There are several helpful conclusions that can be made after this survey:

1) Most students feel fine in a language-learning classroom, but they struggle a lot with their classmates. Almost every student complained about the problem students C and F in their answers;
2) The students are mostly confident in their English abilities, besides three of them;
3) The students prefer games, both digital and non-digital;
4) The students feel anxious or unsure about trying new methods of learning, they are wary of activities that might involve performance in front of the class;
5) Overall, they trust me to create a good learning environment for them, and largely think I am managing fine.

3.2.2 Lesson 1 – Lecture-style lesson

After having examined the initial surveys, the first lesson out of the 4-lesson plan was based off of a lecturer-style teaching. In such classes, the main focus tends to be on the teacher. Price-Banks (2020) notes that "lecturing is the leading practice of teaching by educators of all types" (Price-Banks, 2020: 155) and that lecturing is useful "to cover large amounts of information in a short

period" (Price-Banks, 2020: 155), although a standard lecture is a passive form of teaching (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva, 2008). As such, discussion and question session was used as an active learning technique, since "lecturing with active learning techniques was proven effective towards building content-based knowledge, memorization, recall and critical thinking" (Price-Banks, 2020: 157).

This style of lesson is excellent for topic introductions, where longer chunks of information need to be processed by students. It also engages the listening skills, as the students mainly listen to the teacher, and speaking skills, as the student input is in the form of a question-answer session with the teacher. In terms of participation, it allows overwhelmed or shy people to opt out of answering unless spoken to directly, and allows students to ask questions to the teacher in return. The students are given adequate opportunities to process or clarify the given information.

For this lesson, as I could not use presentations, each student received a printout of 12 steps of hero's journey. During the lesson, as I discussed each of the steps with the class, they were encouraged to choose a popular fiction narrative, and note the moments in it that overlap with the steps in the hero's journey. As per request of the students, we examine *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.* Wherever possible, I praised the students for their opinions or deductions.

I would say that the class was mostly engaged with the lesson. There were 15 participants – almost the entire class, besides student L. This lesson really appealed to those who enjoy speaking and discussions, as well as media analysis. Most students spoke at least once during the lesson, though not all did by their own volition. Students D, G, H, I, M, O, N, and P spoke up frequently, though student P also got distracted a lot. Student B also participated quite actively, but it was difficult for her, since she got overwhelmed trying to speak up.

This class works best with students who are highly motivated and organized. Some students, like students E, F, C, J, and M, who are not interested in the subject, used this lesson to talk to each other, or do something else. Students C and F were especially a problem, as they were quite noisy, despite my remarks.

Their response survey (Appendix 2) consisted of 6 questions. The first question in their response was to test their memory, and list the 12 steps of a hero's journey. 5 students left this question empty, 3 of them listed almost all 12 steps, 2 of them could list three steps, and the rest all listed over 5 steps that they could remember.

The next question was about the materials I had used to teach, and the students correctly observed that I mostly spoke (and encouraged them to speak), wrote notes on the whiteboard, and used printout materials to give each student.

Next, I asked them how they felt during the lesson.

Figure 3.2.2.1 How did you feel during the lesson?

The majority of students (6) responded that they felt alright, but commented they disliked the noise. Two students felt very well, and four students felt good. One student reported feeling adventurous.

Then, I asked them to rate the class participation, whether it was low or high.

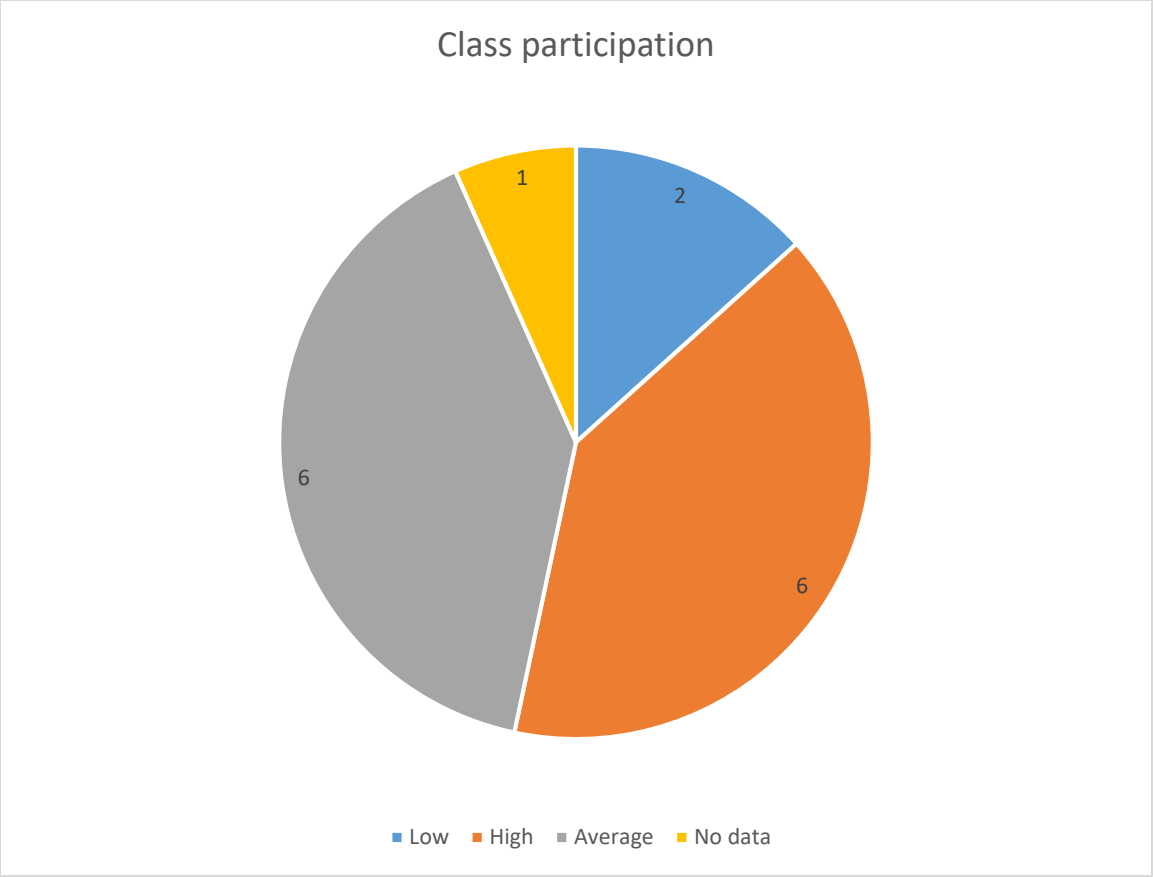


Figure 3.2.2.2 Was the class participation low or high?

Students mainly thought that the class participation was either average (6) or high (6). I would have to agree with the students stating the class activity was average – while many of them engaged, there were also plenty who essentially ignored the lesson to do something else. Two students thought the activity was low, and one student left the answer blank.

For question five, I asked them to list some benefits of lecture-style lessons. While five students answered with "nothing", the rest wrote some benefits in this open-ended question. They listed that:

a) It allows to practice listening;
b) It gives time to ask for extra questions if necessary;
c) It introduces a lot of information;
d) It gives enough time to think;
e) People do not feel pressured to speak if they do not want to.

The last question was about the drawbacks of lecture-style lessons. Many (7) answered that they could not name any, others stated that:

a) It can be quite boring;
b) Not everybody participates;
c) No games to play;
d) Not everybody learns well by processing audio information.

Overall, while I would have preferred a higher class participation, those who did participate performed well. They were able to retain and understand information presented in the class. However, it was clear that this type of lesson works with a very specific type of student – one who is self-motivated and disciplined enough to pay attention.

3.2.3 Lesson 2 – Storyline assembly

Lesson 2 is titled "storyline assembly". The final task of the next 3 lessons is to produce a performance based on a fairytale. In this class, the students were divided into two groups, and given pieces of a fairytale to put back together. Then, they had to read it, and summarize the basic plot and characters in it. To complete this lesson, the students were given the mixed up text of the fairytale, as well as a checklist to help them keep track of the things to be done.

Group 1 consisted of 7 boys (all besides student L), who got to recreate the story of Cinderella. Only student G (who almost immediately assumed a leadership role), O, and N were persistent enough to complete the given task, the others lost interest in it by the 10 minute mark.

Group 2 consisted of the remaining students, the girls and one boy, student L. This group put in a lot of effort, and seemed to be engaged and cooperative, however, they struggled a lot with completing the task. They asked for several hints, and, in the end, did not manage to put the story back together. In the end, I had to give them the assembled story, since otherwise they would not be able to progress with the task.

After the lesson, they were given a questionnaire to complete (Appendix 3).

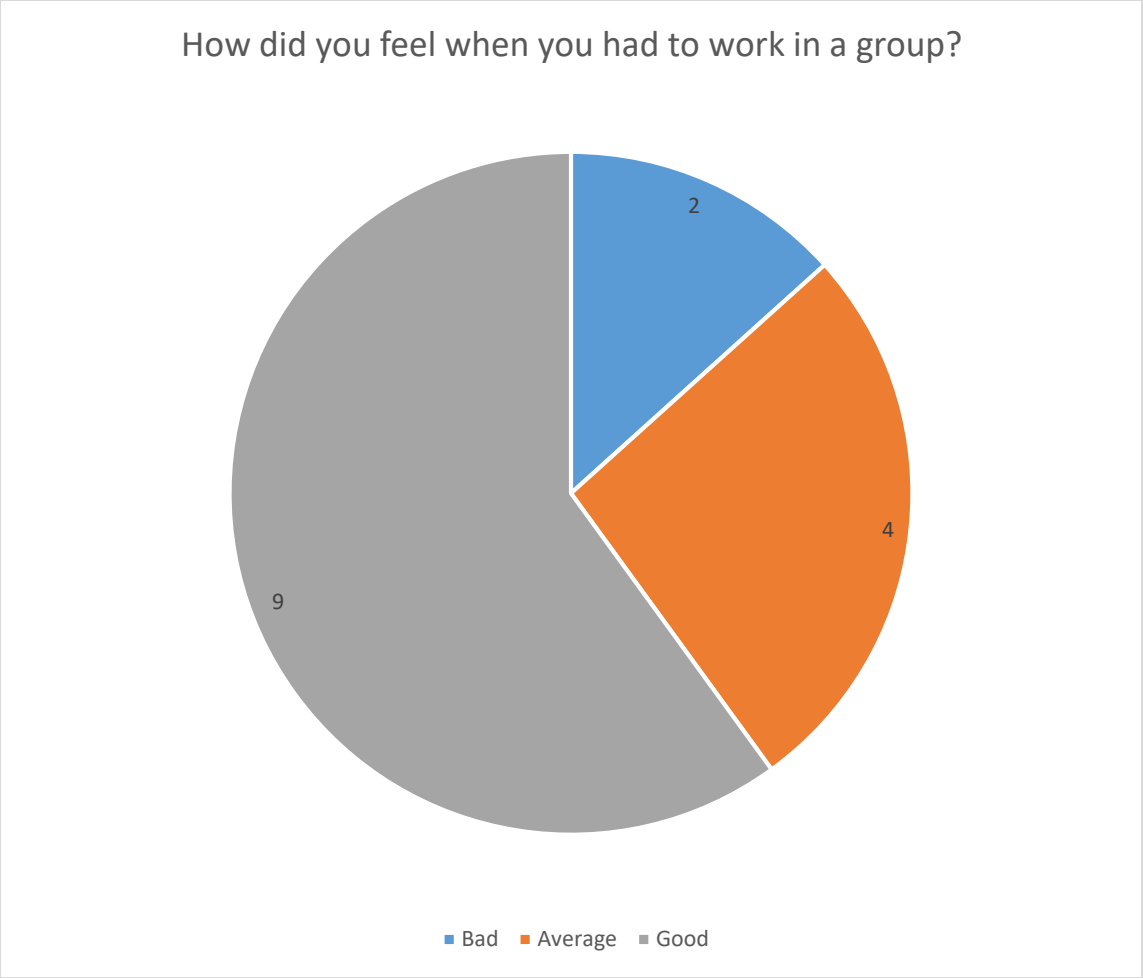


Figure 3.2.3.1 How did you feel when you had to work in a group?

First, I asked them how they felt while working in groups. As stated before, several people in this class have been diagnosed with anxiety, and some people do not get along with some others, so I expected some hesitation when making them work in groups. However, the response was surprisingly positive – most students, including the anxious ones, felt fine while working in groups, and enjoyed it. The two students who were not happy justified their responses by stating that their group was too chaotic, and that it was difficult to organize any productive work with them.

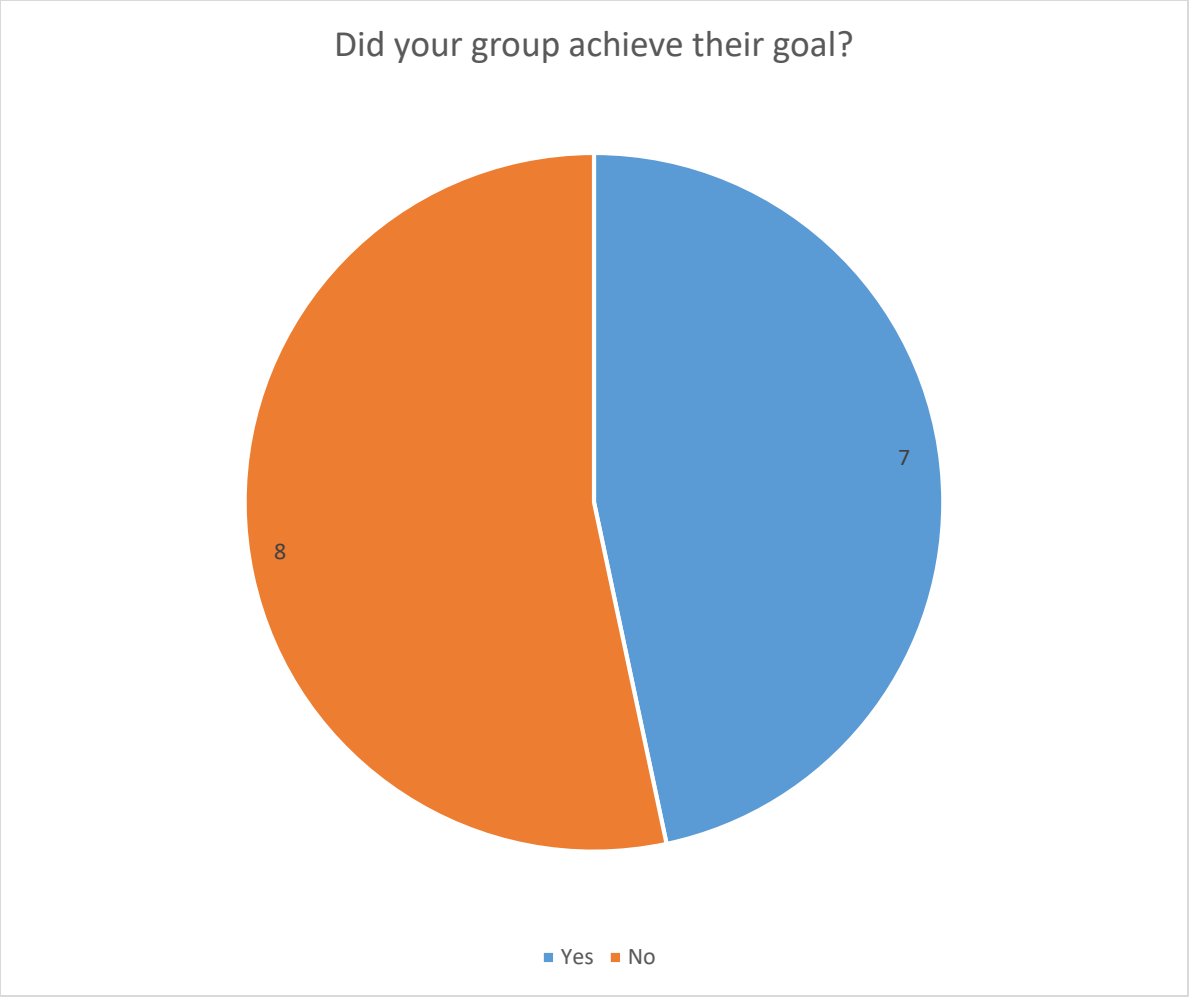


Figure 3.2.3.2 In your opinion, were your goals as a group achieved?

Secondly, I asked if they managed to achieve the goal for this lesson – completing the story puzzle and reading it. The group of mostly girls answered honestly, that they did not manage to complete the task, and some specified that the story was either too long, or could have had more indicators as to which pieces go together. They felt that there was not enough time, and they felt confused. The other group answered that they achieved the goal.

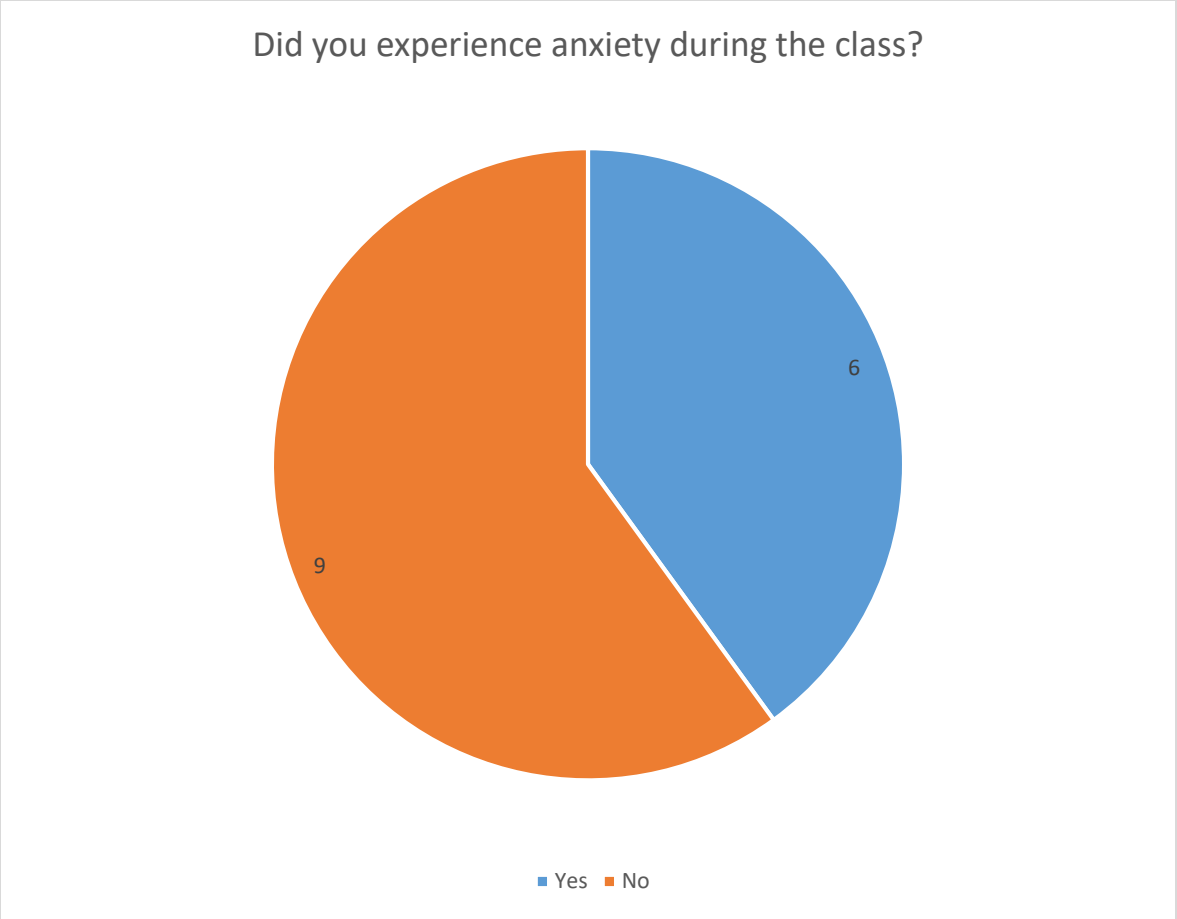


Figure 3.2.3.3 Did you ever feel anxious at any point? Why?

The next question asked if they, at any point, felt anxious during the lesson. The majority of students responded with no, however, six of them reported feeling anxiety. In additional comments, they mentioned that they tend to be overwhelmed when working with so many people, that it was tiring, and that the stress of possibly not finishing the task on time made them feel nervous.

Then, I asked what could be improved, doing this sort of task in the future. The students mentioned that they definitely needed more time to finish the task, especially the group which struggled with completion. Some suggested that the puzzle could be easier, be cut in a layout that would make it more apparent which pieces go together, or have a shorter story as a basis – their stories were 4-5 pages long, and many thought they were too long for this particular activity.

I also asked them to note how I, as their English teacher, was helpful during this task, and they listed several aspects, including:

1) explaining confusing aspects,

2) giving hints,
3) helping by putting some of the pieces together,
4) checking in and monitoring progress,
5) answering questions,
6) preparing materials in advance.

Lastly, I asked them whether or not they enjoyed the task, and why so.

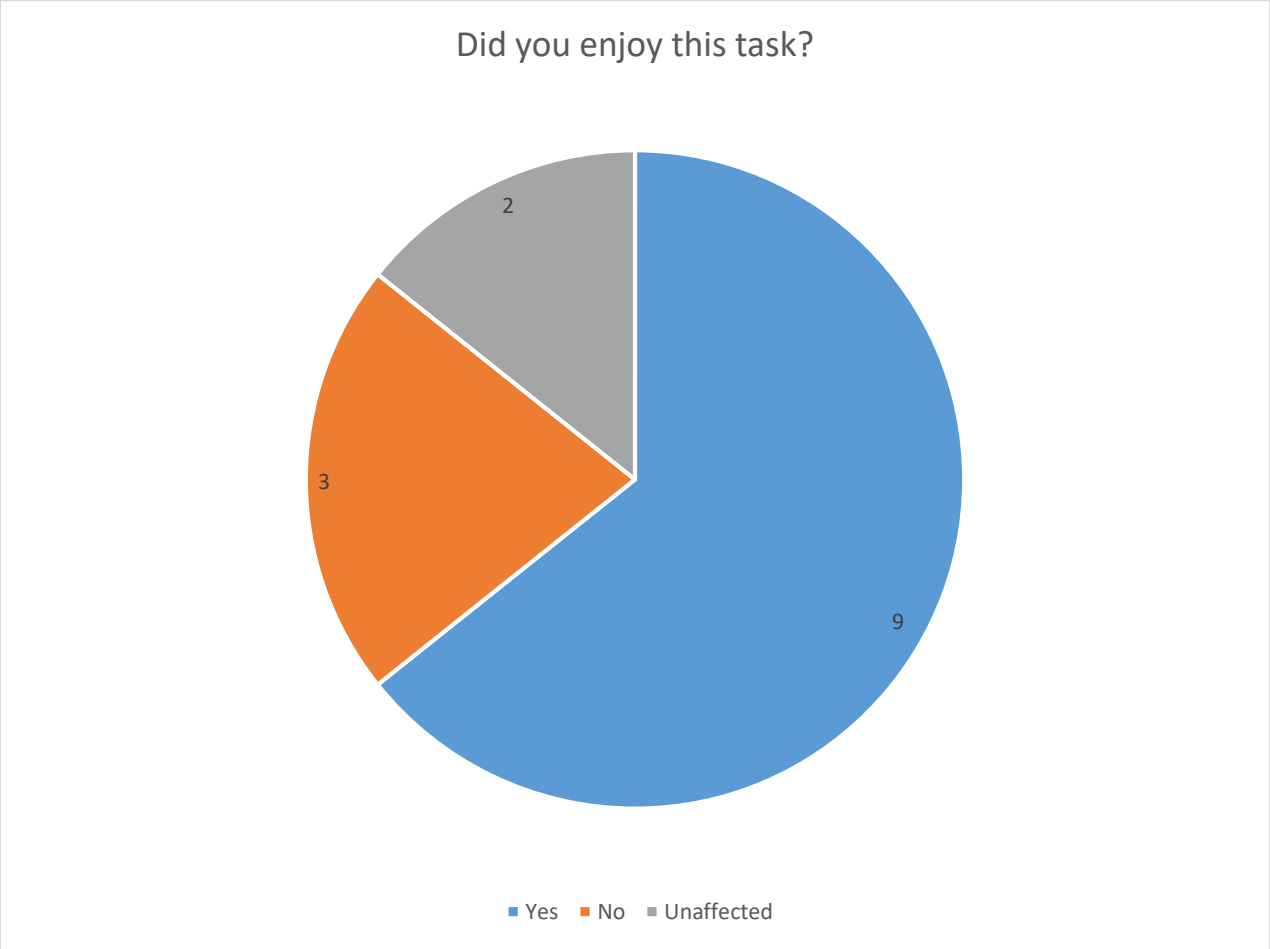


Figure 3.2.3.4 Did you enjoy this task? Why or why not?

Two of the students responded that they were unaffected by the task, meaning, they felt like they do in any other class.

Three students did not enjoy the lesson. As their reasons, they stated that it was too chaotic to work, and that they did not like working with their groupmates, and that they had anxiety.

However, most students reported enjoying the lesson. The students enjoyed the puzzle, despite lacking the time. They were also fond of the stories they got to read. Students also noted that they greatly enjoyed the new dynamics and groupwork – while these students had collaborated

with each other before, usually, they worked in pairs or in small groups up to four people. This task is one of the rare opportunities they got to work in larger group (8 people). This made the task more exciting to the students, as the novelty of the situation appealed to them.

3.2.4 Lesson 3 – Groupwork and task division

Lesson 3 was an opportunity for the students to do some organizing. They had to put together a plotline after reading their assigned stories, divide the roles, decide what changes they would make, and practice.

Overall, the lesson went fine. Unlike the other lessons, this one was held outside – the weather was sunny and warm, and it also offered them more space than the tiny classroom they usually work in. The group of girls were very efficient, and managed to successfully read the story and divide the roles. The group of boys, however, struggled to focus on the task at hand, seemingly distracted by the outdoor setting. Only some of them attempted to do the task, and I had to spend significantly more time with this group, to motivate them to work, otherwise, they would try to slack off as soon as I approached the other group to check up on them.

It must also be noted that the students had a week and a half in between lessons 3 and 4 – the one for their preparation and the one for their performance. It was not realistic to expect them to finish reading, dividing roles and rehearsal in only 40 minutes, so they had extra time to finish rehearsing outside of lessons.

After the lesson, the students were given a lesson questionnaire to fill in. First, they were asked which story they got. Students A, B, D, I, K, H, P and L got the Mouse Princess, a fairytale from Finland about a man called Veikko, the youngest of three brothers, is tasked with finding himself a bride when his father instructs the three brothers to marry. The father uses a strange tradition to determine where each of the brothers will find a wife. Each of the brothers chops down a tree, and goes in the direction where the tree falls to find a bride. Veikko goes into a forest and finds a talking mouse, who offers to be his bride. The mouse turns out to be an enchanted princess, and turns into a human once the spell is removed. Veikko and the mouse princess get married, and Veikko's brothers are extremely jealous that the brother they had made fun of so much found a much better wife than they did.

The other group, students E, G, J, C, F, N, O, worked with the well-known story of Cinderella. This is a tale of a young woman, whose mother dies, and her father marries an evil stepmother, who has daughters of her own. They mistreat her, and make her into their servant.

Cinderella gets help from her fairy godmother to go to the ball, where she meets and falls in love with the prince. She loses her glass slipper, which helps the prince find her, and they get married.

These stories were chosen because they contained an appropriate amount of characters – it was important to have a number of characters that fits the amount of students, so nobody would feel excluded from participating.

Then I asked what role they would perform in the play, and included the table below:

The Mouse Princess		**Cinderella**	
Student	**Role**	**Student**	**Role**
Student A	Veikko	Student E	The evil stepsister
Student B	Mouse Princess	Student G	Narrator
Student D	The older brother	Student J	Fairy Godmother
Student I	The narrator	Student C	The Prince
Student K	The middle brother	Student F	The evil stepsister
Student H	The evil man	Student N	The evil stepmother
Student P	The father	Student O	Cinderella
Student L	The servant of the mouse princess		

Table 3.2.4.1 Play roles, as divided by students

It is interesting to note that the two groups divided their roles differently. The Cinderella group struggled with role division, not being able to decide who the main character would be.

The Mouse Princess group, however, divided the roles more or less according to the language proficiency level of each student. For example, the girls who were better at English were given the more important roles, for example, the narrator or Veikko, while the students who did not speak English as well, or who had stage fright, were given silent roles, or roles with little dialogue.

Then, I asked how the responsibilities were divided in their groups. The Cinderella group arranged the responsibilities by roles – for example, if Cinderella had a scene where she gets a new outfit for the ball, whoever played Cinderella was responsible for providing the needed outfit.

The Mouse Princess group collaborated differently – if they had to prepare something for a scene, all of them participated to help. They also delegated some of them to be the directors, to observe their progress.

The next question was "When you were given the chance, did you mainly work individually, or collaborated with your groupmates? Why?"

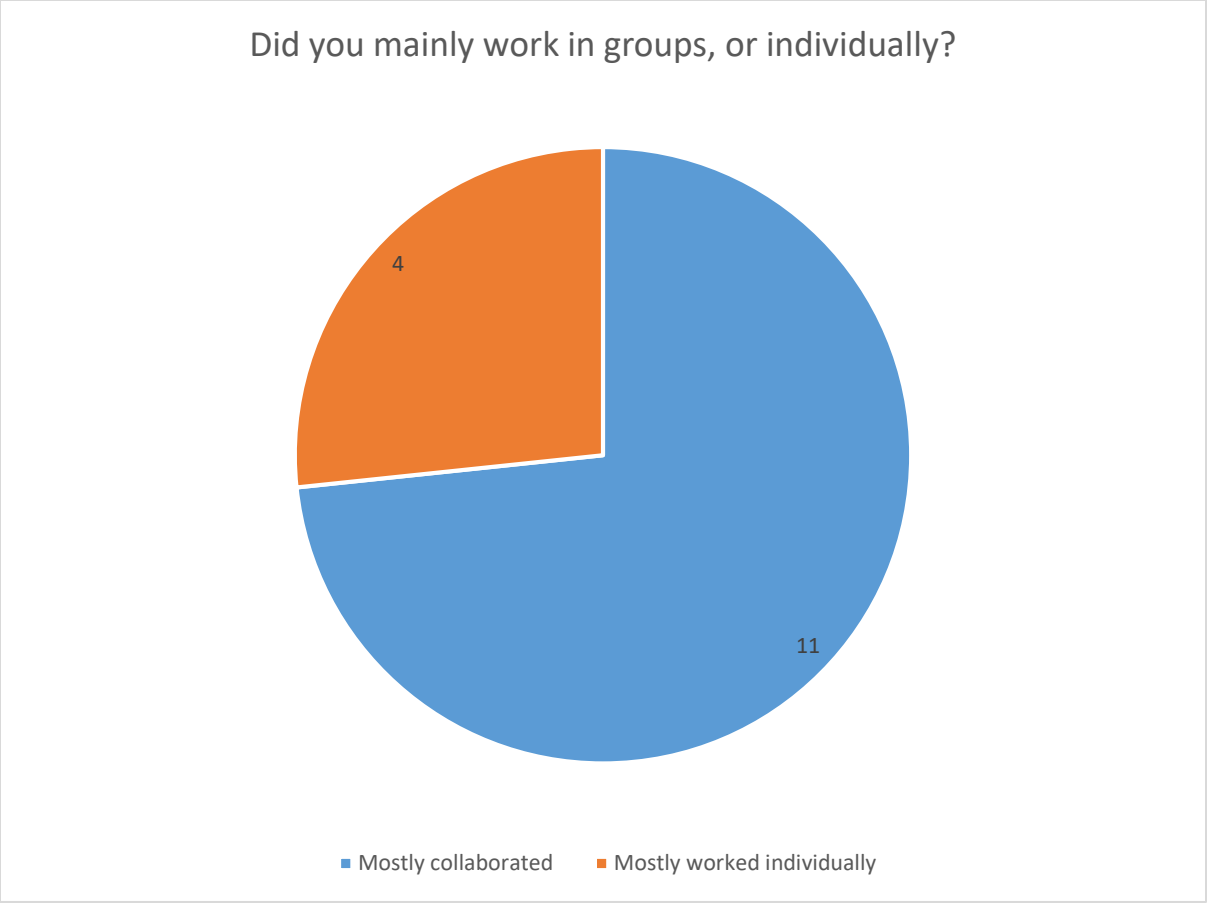


Figure 3.2.4.1 Did you mainly work in groups, or individually?

Eleven students reported that they mostly collaborated, since this task is mainly a team effort, and most scenes included several characters. However, some students, who had scenes with only their character, preferred to work individually when the environment got too chaotic.

I also asked what changes they decided to make to the story. The Mouse Princess group decided to make no changes to the story, while the Cinderella group did a more modernized version of the story (for instance, having Cinderella go to the ball in a Rolls-Royce, and the ball be in a club, not in a palace).

This lesson was held outside. So, naturally, I asked in what ways it impacted their ability to work, compared to working in the classroom. The students gave several varied responses:

a) The environment was nice – the majority mentioned that they really liked working outside, in the nice, sunny weather, that it was a great change of pace from their regular lessons, and it helped them be more productive;
b) They had a lot of space – the lesson being outside means the students were not restricted by the limitations of the classroom, they had an opportunity to distance themselves from other people, or the other group, to avoid being disturbed;
c) It made them more productive – some students stated that the more enjoyable and relaxing environment helped them focus more, and made them more productive, however, there were some who admitted the opposite – that they were less focused;
d) It was a change of space – the change of location was perceived as exciting for the students;
e) The fresh air was lovely – it is hard to ventilate their classroom, due to the poor air circulation, and it being on the sunny side of the building, and some mentioned they felt much better being outside in the fresh air;
f) Very fun and exciting;
g) Students were more relaxed.

Lastly, I asked them what I, as their English teacher, did to assist them during the lesson. The students responded that their teacher helped by:

a) Providing explanations;
b) Checking in and offering help;
c) Giving ideas.

3.2.5 Lesson 4 – Theatrical performance

The final lesson in this lesson set was the one devoted to their performances. The lesson was fine, but the time management was a serious issue – students were asked to fill in evaluation sheets about the other group's performance, and they got into discussion. It was hard to make them stop, and we nearly ran out of time altogether.

The Mouse Princess group performed well overall. They made very little changes to the script, and it was less of a play, and more story reading by the narrator, with the other people acting out the necessary bits. Some of them struggled with remembering their lines.

The Cinderella group was hindered by some of the group members who did not care much about putting in a decent amount of effort. It was clear they did not revise much, and many of them

improvised as they went along. They also did not set up the necessities before performing – for example, making sure that the music worked for the ballroom scene.

The first question in their questionnaires was about whose performances they enjoyed the most, and why. The class really liked the performers who played Veikko, the Mouse Princess, and Cinderella, noting their effort and abilities.

The second question was "You had to observe others, and participate in discussion. What feedback did you give the other groups?" The Mouse Princess group was quite ruthless in their feedback, stating than the other group's performance could have been much better, and improved by being more thorough. The Cinderella group did not have much to say, mainly noting that they liked the faithfulness to the story, as well as the fact that the group had attempted to wear costumes, for example, the Mouse Princess had mouse ears and tail, and so on.

Then, I asked how the teacher participated in the class. The students stated that the teacher was in an observer role – I mainly watched the performances, and offered my feedback to them, in the form of oral feedback, as well as grades.

Afterwards, I asked how they felt during their performance.

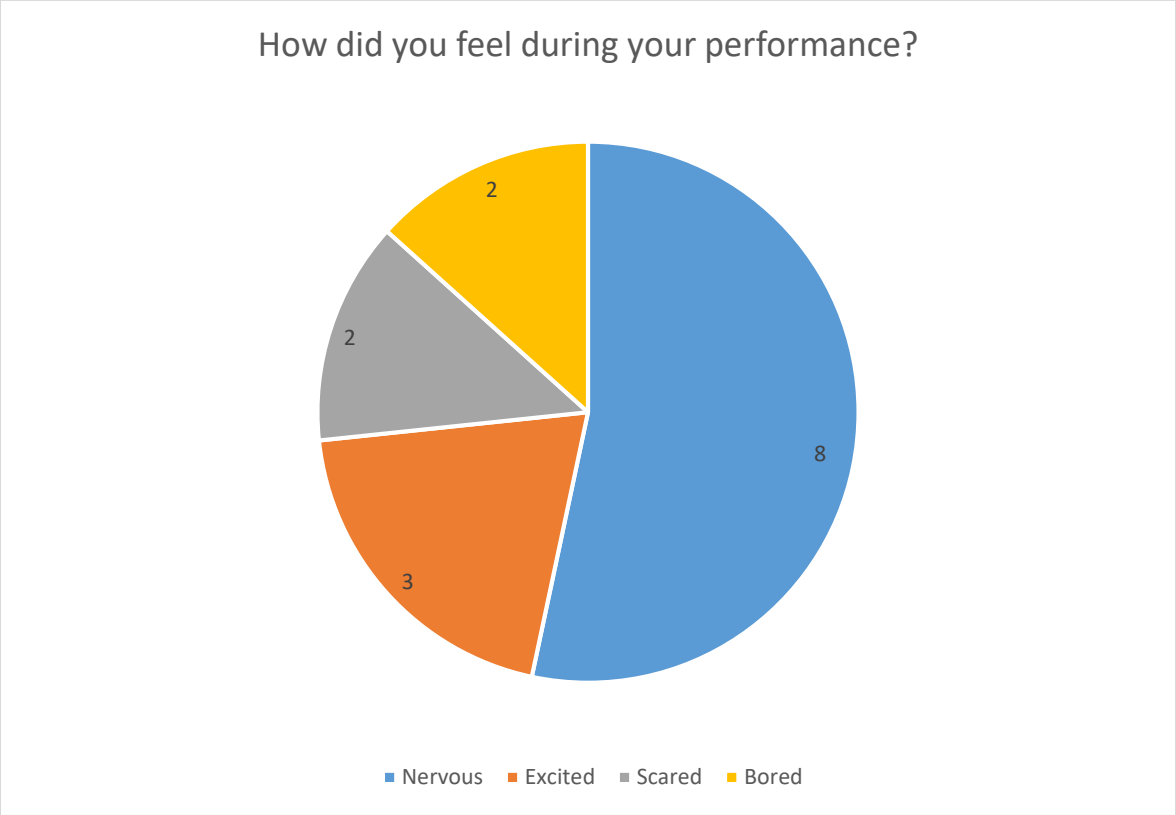


Figure 3.2.5.1 How did you feel during your performance?

Three students reported feeling excited, because they were looking forward to showing the results of their work to others. Two students felt scared, because they thought they were unprepared for the lesson. Two students felt bored, mainly due to them having unimportant roles, so, as soon as they were done with their scenes, they had nothing else to do.

However, the majority of them felt nervous or anxious, since they knew the performances would be graded. Even though they trusted me to evaluate them fairly, many reported feeling stressed, and that they had placed high expectations on themselves.

Later, I asked if they found anything beneficial about this lesson. Students mentioned they enjoyed observing the other group's performance, and that it allowed them to compare the two performances. They also appreciated being given a chance to voice their opinion, and feel like their feedback was valued.

Lastly, I asked them if anything could be improved in this type of lesson. Students mainly mentioned that it would have been preferrable to extend this lesson to 80 minutes, as 40 minutes felt too restrictive – students wanted to keep discussing, which is something I had to limit in order for both groups have enough time to perform.

4. INTERVIEW WITH A TEACHER

To complete the triangulation method, the last part of this research includes an interview with a teacher. Initially, I offered to interview some of my colleagues at the school I work at, however, none of them volunteered. As a result, I interviewed somebody who works at a secondary school in Riga. She has had not only more experience teaching (about 5 years), but she also works with 8th graders, which is my target research group.

I started the interview by asking her if she had ever heard of learned helplessness, to which she replied that she was vaguely familiar with the concept, but did not know the specifics. As such, before proceeding, I briefly explained the concept of learned helplessness, so the interviewee could have the necessary context for this interview.

Then, I asked her for a brief introduction. She is a young woman, who has around 5 years of teaching experience, two of them at her current school, where she teaches English, and also German as an extracurricular activity. She primarily works with the 11th and 12th grade students, focusing on speaking skills during her lessons, and leaving reading and writing for at-home practicing. However, she also works with 8th and 9th grade students, as one of her colleagues had quit earlier this year, so she is teaching those grades as well.

Then, I inquired if there are any groups or types of people that, in her opinion, would be prone to developing learned helplessness. In her opinion, learned helplessness is connected to overall mental health and well-being. She expressed that students with learning disabilities or anxiety disorders, for example, could be more likely to develop learned helplessness, since having a limitation that stems from mental health issues is not easy to overcome. Connected to that idea, she also speculated that there is a chance that students who experience abusive situations, whether at home (abuse from parents or siblings) or at school (bullying), develop learned helplessness, especially if they feel they are trapped in that situation, and more so if their own efforts and efforts from authority figures have failed to stop the awful situation they might be in.

She mentioned the Maslov's hierarchy of needs, and how she largely believes that human beings need to feel some level of stability before thinking about self-development. In essence, if a child experiences a prolonged stressful situation that threatens their stability, for example, their family lives in poverty, they are experiencing abuse, they face discrimination that they feel powerless to stop, that can impact their ability to learn.

Afterwards, we talked about language teaching aspects. I asked if she ever struggled with students being avoidant to learn or practice something, to which she replied affirmatively. She stated that some students dislike being forced to speak so much, especially those who are newcomers to her class. She mentioned a couple of transfer students in the 11th grade, whose overall English level was lower than that of the rest of the class, which means they feel pressured when in an English-learning classroom. However, the students mostly understand that it is necessary for their development, and rarely outright refuse to participate in class. If they do, she takes it as a sign that students are distracted by another pressing issue that is happening in their lives, and makes them come to consultation hours to catch up.

I contrasted this to my experience, where I have had a few students either avoid my lessons outright, or refuse to participate because they are not good at a particular activity, so they do not wish to participate. This led to our discussion about classroom environments. The interviewee said that, for her, to avoid these situations, it is important to create a welcoming, but firm environment, where students are not just encouraged to try any activities offered to them, but more or less obligated to. She said it was hard to explain, but the students have to understand that avoiding speaking in her classroom was not an option – each lesson, she made sure that each student had spoken at least once, since the classroom is often the only environment where the students primarily speak English. Of course, they encounter English online, but, at home, each of them mainly speaks their native language, or a mixture of their native language and the language of the state (Latvian). It is intimidating, in a way, but, as she stated, it is important that students are made to challenge this hurdle, and understand that they can overcome it.

She also stated that I should not fear being assertive in my classroom, and that too many teachers avoid assertiveness to avoid appearing rude or demanding towards their students, and that many teachers fear or dislike parents. In this case, it is important to have strong support from the school administration, and good cooperation with them – they have to be involved in the teaching process, and preemptively stop the attempts of parents to influence it. In her opinion, that is the job of the school administration, and not teachers.

Following this, I asked if such a situation could place undue stress on teachers, and lead to them developing learned helplessness. “Certainly,” she replied, “all teachers are also human beings, who are vulnerable to stress, exhaustion, anxiety, any everything else relating to the emotional side of teaching”. She also stated that she would not be surprised if many teachers could

be diagnosed with learned helplessness by a psychologist. The increased amount of teaching leaving the profession, especially lately, is a sign of exhaustion, but could also signify learned helplessness, where teachers have been enduring low pay, lessening societal respect, parental and administrative pressures, change in teaching methodology, for so long, that quitting the profession can seem like the only reasonable way to deal with the feeling of helplessness that can appear if witnessing this for a prolonged period of time.

She added, however, that this is a double-sided coin – while quitting of teachers puts more pressure and work on the teachers who stay, she sees it as people starting to set healthy boundaries. She notes that it has been an overall trend lately, across multiple professions and not just teaching, but that people were refusing to accept or stay in jobs that did not meet their salary expectations, did not respect their work-life balance, did not fight to protect their rights, etc. It might be a harsh, but necessary response.

Boundaries are important in a classroom as well, so we talked about those as well. I said that students might use their boundaries to refuse to learn a subject or a topic, and she agreed that it was a possibility. She also added that there was not a solid solution to this – essentially, her strategy was to create an environment where students are expected to learn, and to make the understand that there are consequences for failing to do so.

Environment certainly helps shape people into the people that they are. This is something Salinger and colleagues themselves observed during their initial experiments testing learned helplessness – how the available resources and surroundings impacted the results of the test subjects. I asked her what makes a learning environment good.

She replied that it was quite a subjective question, and that most teachers would give differing answers. It largely depends on the age of the students, as well as the personality of the teacher. As an example, she states that her classroom is equipped for language teaching – she has posters, grammar sheets, and so on posted on her walls, and her students are also required to keep a folder for grammar printouts. When a student does not remember a grammar concept, she does not explain it again, but instead, points to the student where they can find that information, which encourages independence and problem-solving. “I refuse to spoon-feed my students anything,” she explained. “Naturally, I explain something if that is the first time my students encounter it, but sometimes students perceive teachers as a resource that can simplify their life, rather than a person. My classroom is arranged in such a way that I can display the information to them as they need it,

and I give them the necessary materials. But they still have to figure out things for themselves." She added, however, that things are considerably difficult for the teachers who would benefit from this teaching style, but have no access to their own classroom to use. "In that sense, I am very privileged, as I get a separate room for both my English and German classes. I know there are teachers who do not get even one classroom, let alone two."

Lastly, a good language environment fits not only the teacher, but also the needs of students. The teacher has to be adaptive and sensitive to what the students need, as the students might not be able to verbalize or even comprehend their needs, as they are rarely masters of self-reflection.

To finalize our discussion, I asked a couple more questions. First, I asked if there were any particular aspects of teaching 8th graders, to which she replied that 8th graders, in her opinion, do not yet understand consequences fully, and tend to be more rebellious at their age, in comparison to students in grades 9-12.

Lastly, I asked if there was any advice she would like to give to other teachers who encounter resistance born from learned helplessness. She said that it is important to be firm in setting boundaries and expectations – "as teachers, we often feel guilty about things we have no control over. A child experiencing hardship in other areas of life does not give them a free pass everywhere else. Kindness is valuable, but students often try to take advantage of that via a sob story". Motivation can only go so far, and student's understanding that their results are achievable depend largely on relentlessness. Support from others is also crucial, such as a school psychologist, if a school has one, since they are actually qualified professionals who can diagnose and help treat child's underlying issues.

5. RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

This research set out to investigate learned helplessness, and how it and if it can affect students in a grade 8 English language learning classroom.

Research of learned helplessness in largely the focus of Seligman, who first described the idea in 1967. Since then, considerably more research has been done, identifying other aspects of learned helplessness, and how it connects to other aspects of human life, examined in the introduction chapter.

Learning is, of course, affected by it as well. The goal of this research paper was to examine various strategies of mitigating learned helplessness in an English language-learning classroom, in particular, focusing on grade 8 students at a school in Jurmala, Latvia, using a case study, and triangulation (observations, student work, and interview with a teacher).

While Chapter 1 explained what learned helplessness is, Chapter 2 looked at the causes and effects of it. It also listed several methods of mitigation, which I used when preparing for the data gathering phase. Among those, it was suggested that the most efficient way to countering learned helplessness would be to involve learned optimism and good coping skills, as noted by both Seligman (2018) and Price-Banks (2020). Price-Banks (2020) said it was also important to encourage connections between students and pair work, discussions and study groups. She also noted the importance of teacher observations. Seligman (2018), meanwhile, noted it was important for students to receive praise, get a chance to provide input, and having realistic and achievable goals. In addition, Miller (2015) recommended creating available resources, and to make students understand the importance of failure.

Chapter 3 describes the empirical research data. Based on the suggestions described in Chapter 2, I developed a set of lessons to try out with my students. I did an initial questionnaire of the students, as it was important to provide students with a chance to give input, and I took their preferences into account. Since teacher observations and connections with peers were also listed as important, I made sure they had group work included as part of their tasks.

Their end goal was to develop a performance based on a fairytale, which they worked on for 4 lessons. The first lesson was an introductory one, in the style of a lecture. While the students thought this was a fine lesson, they also admitted it was easy to lose focus and get bored.

The second lesson used a puzzle, which the groups had to put together to end up with a fairytale. While the groups struggled to complete the task, the enjoyment of this lesson was great – students said they rarely get to work in large groups, so it was a pleasant change.

Change from the norm was also the source of enjoyment in the next lesson, where the groups divided roles and practiced, as the lesson was held outside. The new environment suited the task at hand, and students reported feeling invigorated and excited.

Lesson 4 was the source of the most anxiety, largely because that many students were worried about getting a good grade on their performance, and feeling nervous about performing in front of others. Students also enjoyed the discussion part, where they got to express their opinion about the other group and their work.

Overall, I would say that these strategies were a success. According to the student profiles, there are certainly some who would be susceptible to learned helplessness – students who do not speak English that well, or students who are diagnosed with anxiety, for example. However, placing them in groups helped them a lot – they felt supported, and understood they have to achieve the task together, and not on their own. A lot of them also trusted both me and their groupmates a lot. The groups also, for the most part, sensibly managed the division of roles and responsibilities, which helped the less confident students be more comfortable (such as giving less important roles to the more nervous people, or roles with less speaking to the people who struggle with English).

Overall, I can conclude that support is vital to minimizing learned helplessness, and this support does not need to come from only the teacher – groupmates can be a good way to ensure that a struggling student receives the appropriate assistance. While students struggled with completing some tasks, and were nervous at first to engage in creating a performance, something they had not done before in my classes, the results and the reception of it was good overall.

It must also be noted that a good environment also helped a lot, supported by both student surveys and the teacher interview in Chapter 4. Students enjoyed the outside class, stating that being outside of their cramped, small classroom gave them more space to work better, it made them excited and happy, and the fresh air and extra space helped calm the students who are more prone to nervousness.

Meanwhile, in the teacher interview, it was noted that the environment, whether exciting or not, plays a huge role in learning – it has to be appropriate to both the teacher's and students'

needs. Teachers also need to be in control of their environment, meaning, that teachers who do not have a dedicated space are at a disadvantage.

The interview with a teacher gave other insights as well, for example, that setting strict boundaries, and cooperating with other colleagues at school is crucial for language learning success. It is also possible that teachers themselves, much like their students, can be at risk of developing learned helplessness.

Further research can certainly be done on this subject. A case study could be done, as a collaboration between a teacher and a psychologist, who would be able to provide insight on the mental health aspects of it. Furthermore, it would be interesting to do this sort of research across other subjects, and compare results, and see how learned helplessness affects language learning in comparison to, for example, math, or visual arts learning.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Initial survey (blank)

Initial survey

Class environment

How do you feel when you have to work in class?

Does the environment mostly help you learn, or hinder you?

What helps you learn during class?

What hinders you?

What does the English teacher do to create a good learning environment?

Do you ever feel stressed or anxious in the class? Why?

Language abilities and activities

Language learning skills are typically divided into speaking, listening, writing, and reading. Which one of these do you think you're the best at? Why?

Which one of these do you find the most challenging?

Why, in your opinion, some people struggle to learn languages?

How should the perfect lesson for you look like? What kinds of activities should be there?

On a scale from 1-10, rate how much you'd enjoy participating in each of these activities:
Non-digital games:
Storytelling:
Singing:
Pair work:
Group discussion:
Digital games:
Individual creative work:
Worksheets with tasks:
Roleplay/theatrical sketches:

Do you enjoy learning languages? Why or why not?

Do you feel anxiety or stress while in a language learning classroom? Why or why not?

What does your English teacher do to help you (or other classmates) feel less anxious about learning?

Appendix 2. Lesson 1 questionnaire
Hero's journey. Introductory lecture

Can you summarize the steps of a hero's journey?

What materials did the teacher use to explain the topic to you?

How did you feel during the lesson?

Was the class participation high or low, in your opinion? Why?

What, in your opinion, are the benefits of lecture-style lessons?

What could be the drawbacks of lecture-style lessons?

Appendix 3. Lesson 2 questionnaire
Hero's journey. Storyline assembly

How did you feel when you had to work in groups?

In your opinion, were your goals as a group achieved? Why or why not?

Did you ever feel anxious at any point? Why?

What could be improved, doing this task in the future?

How was your English teacher helpful during this task?

Did you enjoy this task? Why or why not?

Appendix 4. Lesson 3 questionnaire
Hero's journey. Task division

Which story were you given for the adaptation?

What kind of role will you perform during the performance?

How were the responsibilities divided in your group?

When you were given the chance, did you mainly work individually, or collaborated with your groupmates? Why?

What changes did you decide to make to the story?

This lesson was held outside. In what ways did it impact your ability to work, compared to working in the classroom?

How did the teacher assist you during the lesson?

Appendix 4. Lesson 4 questionnaire
Hero's journey. Theatre play

Whose performance did you enjoy the most, and why?

You had to observe others, and participate in discussion. What feedback did you give the other groups?

How did the teacher participate in the class?

How did you feel during your performance?

What was beneficial about this lesson?

What could be improved?

DOKUMENTĀRĀ LAPA

Diplomdarbs „Stratēģijas iemācītās bezpalīdzības samazināšanai 8.klases angļu valodas stundās” (“Strategies to Minimize Learned Helplessness in Grade 8 English Learning Classroom”) izstrādāts Latvijas Universitātes Pedagoģijas, psiholoģijas un mākslas fakultātē.

Ar savu parakstu apliecinu, ka pētījums veikts patstāvīgi un izmantoti tikai tajā norādītie informācijas avoti.

Autors: Vita Jurāne

(vārds, uzvārds)

Rekomendēju darbu aizstāvēšanai

Darba zinātniskais vadītājs/a: assist. prof. Dr. Paed. Anna Stavicka

(zinātniskais grāds, vārds, uzvārds)

ŠIS DARBS PARAKSTĪTS AR DROŠU ELEKTRONISKO PARAKSTU UN SATUR LAIKA ZĪMOGU.