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Der Theoriebegriff in der fremdsprachendidaktischen Forschung

Meral Rooben, Christiane Lütge, Florian Schultz-Pernice, Johanna Vejvoda, Michael Sailer,

Frank Fischer & Nicole Holtzmann

Diagnosing Cognitive Engagement in TEF

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Speaking Tests in the Lower Secondary Foreign Language Classroom: Students' Views on Usefulness, Anxiety, Preparation and Feedback



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This study examines the views and wishes of lower secondary school students regarding speaking tests in the foreign language classroom. 254 students from French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland completed a written questionnaire on preparation, feedback, usefulness and stress during speaking tests in German as a foreign language. In addition, short interviews were conducted with 84 students directly after an oral exam. Their teachers ($n = 7$) were also asked about their practices and views. Around two thirds of learners consider various test formats (paired tests, individual tests, oral presentations) to be useful; they motivate this primarily with the importance of speaking itself. However, a majority of learners also find all test formats to be rather stressful, with the paired tests being seen as both the least stressful and the most useful format. It is notable that the teachers are more critical than the students when it comes to the usefulness of speaking tests. In regard to feedback, students prefer individual feedback that shows them how they can improve. However, the current feedback may not be directly actionable, and it remains unclear what exactly students (can) do with it.

Schlagworte: anxiety; feedback; German as a foreign language; speaking assessment; students' views; Fremdsprachendidaktik; Forschung; Methodologie; Dialogische Theorie; theoretische Forschung; Theoriebegriff; Lehren; TEF; Kognitives Engagement; Diagnostische Fähigkeiten; Simulationen; Angst, Feedback, Deutsch als Fremdsprache; Foreign language teaching; research; methodology; dialogic theory; theoretical research; concept of Theory; Cognitive Engagement; Diagnostic skills; Simulations; Teaching; anxiety, feedback, German as a foreign language
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Speaking Tests in the Lower Secondary Foreign Language Classroom

Students' Views on Usefulness, Anxiety, Preparation and Feedback

GABRIELA LÜTHI¹, ELISABETH PEYER² & NADIA RAVAZZINI³

Abstract

Diese Studie untersucht, welche Ansichten und Wünsche Schüler:innen der Sekundarstufe I bezüglich Sprechtests im Fremdsprachenunterricht haben. 254 Lernende aus der französisch- und italienischsprachigen Schweiz beantworteten schriftlich Fragen zu Vorbereitung, Feedback, Nützlichkeit und Stress während mündlicher Prüfungen im Fach Deutsch als Fremdsprache. Ebenfalls wurden Kurzinterviews mit 84 Lernenden direkt nach einer mündlichen Prüfung geführt und deren Lehrpersonen ($N = 7$) nach ihren Praktiken und Ansichten befragt. Rund zwei Drittel der Lernenden erachteten verschiedene Prüfungsformate (Paarprüfungen, Einzelprüfungen, Vorträge) als nützlich, wobei sie dies vor allem mit der Wichtigkeit des Sprechens selbst begründen. Alle Prüfungsformate werden von einer Mehrheit jedoch auch als eher stressig empfunden, wobei die Paarprüfung sowohl als das am wenigsten stressige als auch als das nützlichste Format angesehen wird. Auffallend ist, dass die Lehrpersonen bezüglich der Nützlichkeit kritischer eingestellt sind als die Lernenden. Bezuglich Feedbacks bevorzugen die Schüler:innen individuelles Feedback, das ihnen zeigt, wie sie sich verbessern können. Allerdings ist das gegebene Feedback möglicherweise nicht direkt umsetzbar und es bleibt unklar, was genau die Lernenden damit machen (können).

1 Introduction

The assessment of speaking skills goes hand-in-hand with various challenges, including the fact that assessing an oral performance is complicated by the fleeting nature of spoken language. Summative assessments of speaking skills in the classroom bring their own set of challenges not only due to the time-consuming nature of these activi-

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ties, but also because they present teachers with a particularly complex task. In particular, the setting demands that teachers simultaneously take on multiple roles – those of test administrator, assessor and, depending on the test format, interlocuter – that in standardised international tests are generally distributed across several people. Thus, many teachers find speaking skills particularly difficult to assess (e. g. Ericksson & Gustafsson, 2005). For learners, foreign language speaking tests are often anxiety-inducing (Huang, 2018).

Against this background, the present study is interested in how students and their teachers of German as a foreign language in lower secondary school experience and view classroom-based speaking tests. Do they find them useful or rather a source of stress? Are the students aware of the learning objectives and do they know how to prepare for tests? And what views and wishes do the students have regarding the feedback they receive after a test? In the setting chosen for the study – the German as a foreign language classroom at the lower secondary level in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland – these questions are of particular importance, as German is a compulsory school subject and a student's German marks can have a decisive impact on their future school trajectory.

2 Students' Views Regarding Language Assessment

In recent years, a large number of studies have been conducted on teachers' language assessment literacy, usually investigating (English as a foreign language) teachers' practices, views and training needs regarding foreign language assessment (e. g. Fulcher, 2012; Vogt et al., 2018; Berry et al., 2019). However, there has been little research on other stakeholders, such as learners (see Gan & Lan's scoping study on language assessment literacy, 2022). This is surprising given that learners are directly affected by assessment and are therefore important stakeholders. As has repeatedly been criticised, learners are often seen as subjects whose performance is evaluated in the assessment process without their views being taken into account (e. g. Vogt et al., 2018; Butler et al., 2021; Butler, 2022). However, if assessment is not seen as separate from teaching and learning, but as interconnected (e. g. Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Lee & Butler, 2020), it is essential to pay attention to learners. As Lee and Butler (2020) emphasise, learners need a minimal understanding of language assessment in order for them to benefit from assessment for their learning. Watanabe (2011), who taught a course in assessment literacy to first-year university students, gives further reasons why knowledge of language assessment is important for learners: He sees teaching assessment literacy to students as a way to help them overcome test anxiety. Furthermore, assessment literacy should also help to actively involve learners in the assessment process and thus increase their motivation.

The aim of our study was not to investigate students' language assessment literacy per se, but to understand how they perceive and experience classroom-based speaking tests. As Butler (2022) showed in an interview study with primary school EFL students,

even young learners can express their views about foreign language assessment. For instance, they can explain why they would like to see less form-focused assessment and how assessment practices could be improved. Similarly, an interview study by Czura (2017) with adolescent EFL learners showed that they were able to discuss the reliability and authenticity of an exam. Butler (2022) concludes from her study that considering learners' experiences and views can provide valuable information for improving assessment practices and make language assessment literacy more directly connected to learning and instruction. In addition, possible discrepancies between teachers' and students' understanding of the target abilities being assessed may be narrowed (Butler, 2022). Such differences in students' and teachers' perceptions of assessment were found in studies by Tarnanen and Huhta (2012), Vogt et al. (2020), Vlanti (2012) and Sato and Ikeda (2015). Feedback, in particular, seems to be an aspect of assessment where students' and teachers' perceptions often differ. For instance, in Vogt et al.'s (2020) large-scale survey of almost 1800 EFL learners and their teachers, teachers reported providing feedback in the form of brief or detailed comments and hints on how to improve learning more frequently than learners reported receiving such feedback. Tarnanen and Huhta's (2012) representative survey of around 1700 students and their teachers also revealed differences in the perception of feedback practices: the teachers' estimates of the frequency of different types of feedback usually were higher than the students', with the greatest discrepancy found in oral feedback to individual learners. In her survey on assessment practices in Greek EFL classrooms, Vlanti (2012) found that significantly more teachers than high school students claimed test activities to be similar to the activities done in the classroom. Sato and Ikeda (2015) discovered discrepancies between university students' perception of the ability being measured by items in high-stake tests and test developers' intentions. For example, items developed to test writing skills were interpreted as reading items. The studies by Vlanti (2012) and Sato and Ikeda (2015) show the importance of transparent communication of the purpose, aim and format of a test during exam preparation, with teachers playing a crucial role (see also Lee & Butler, 2020).

Our study aims to investigate secondary school students' views on different aspects of classroom-based speaking tests, with the intention of contributing to making these tests as useful and stress-free as possible for learners. The following aspects were examined by means of a written survey: students' perceptions of the exam preparation, the usefulness of speaking tests and the feedback they receive as well as the anxiety they feel during various test formats. In order to have a concrete point of reference, a group of students was also interviewed directly after having taken a speaking test. These students answered questions regarding exam preparation and the usefulness of speaking tests. Furthermore, the students' teachers were interviewed about exam preparation, feedback and usefulness of speaking tests. Wherever possible, the teachers' answers are compared to those of the students in order to reveal the extent of agreement or disagreement between the two groups' views.

3 The Context

This paper reports on part of a larger study that investigated classroom-based speaking assessment in German as a foreign language in lower secondary school in Switzerland (Peyer et al., 2025; Peyer et al., in press). In this study, authentic speaking tests, i.e. tests developed and administered by the teachers, were filmed. In addition to the filmed tests, students and teachers were interviewed and students also completed a written questionnaire. This paper focuses on data from the student questionnaire and student interviews and will be completed by the teachers' views expressed in their interviews.

In French-speaking and Italian-speaking Switzerland, German as a foreign language is a compulsory subject. In French-speaking Switzerland, primary school children start learning German in 3rd grade, and the minimum curricular learning outcome for oral production at the end of compulsory schooling in 9th grade is A2.2 (Conférence Intercantonal de l'Instruction Publique, 2012). In Italian-speaking Ticino students start learning German in 7th grade, the minimum learning outcome at the end of 9th grade is A1.2 (Dipartimento dell'educazione, della cultura e dello sport [DECS], 2015).⁴

Within French-speaking Switzerland, the cantons may have their own specific guidelines, which is the case for guidelines on assessment. In the Canton of Fribourg, two to three or three to four (graded) speaking tests are mandatory per year, depending on the number of weekly lessons (Service de l'enseignement obligatoire de langue française, 2020). By contrast, in the Canton of Neuchâtel speaking tests are merely recommended (Direction de l'instruction publique du canton de Berne et al., 2019). In Italian-speaking Ticino, speaking tests were also recommended at the time of data collection (DECS, 2015).⁵

As to students' motivation, the general public discourse is that German is an unpopular subject. This is reflected by the students in our sample: about half of them (somewhat) disagree with the statement "I like German".⁶ Notably, while students do not particularly like German, many do think that they are (somewhat) likely to need it later in their lives.

4 An updated version of the curriculum (September 2022) now only gives the higher level A2.1 as the learning objective for the speaking skill in German (DECS, 2022, p.108).

5 The updated version of the curriculum, dated September 2022 (after our data collection), now requires teachers to test all skills and "not only grammatical or lexical elements" (DECS, 2022, p. 116). Even before this change to the curriculum, the cantonal pedagogic experts told teachers that testing all skills equally was important; this guideline was apparently also recorded in an unpublished internal document (P. Pfeifhofer, personal communication, 24.11.2023).

6 For comparison: in a representative survey of 2,000 secondary school students in central Switzerland, students were even more critical of compulsory French as a foreign language: only 33.3% indicated that they liked or rather liked learning French (while 69.6% indicated that they (rather) liked learning English) (Peyer et al., 2016).

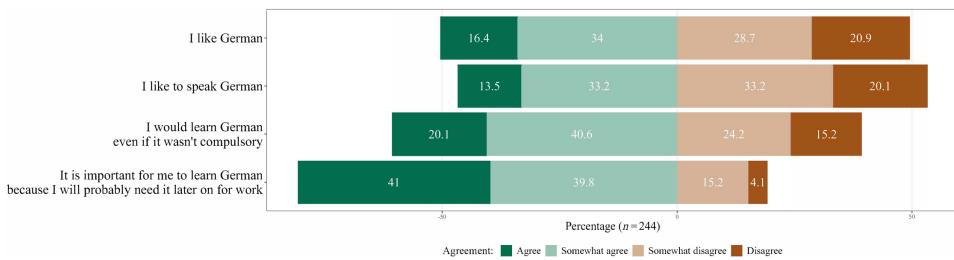


Figure 1: Results of the questionnaire on students' motivation (Source: own illustration)

4 The Study

4.1 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of our study was to understand how students view the speaking tests they regularly have to take in order to receive information for improving assessment practice. To ensure that speaking tests are meaningful for learners, it is important that students are able to prepare in a targeted manner and know the learning objectives. Furthermore, test results should be reported to learners in a way that they can identify their strengths and weaknesses. As Black and William (1998b) emphasise, feedback on tests should give “guidance on how to improve, and each pupil must be given help and an opportunity to work on the improvement” (p. 10). As oral exams are often associated with stress and anxiety (e.g. Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Butler et al., 2021) and test anxiety can have a negative impact on test achievement (e.g. Chapell et al., 2005), we also asked students about this point in order to obtain information about the conditions under which learners are least stressed.

The following research questions were asked:

1. How useful do students find the different formats of speaking tests for improving their German skills?
2. Are students aware of the learning objectives, and do they know how to prepare for the tests? How do the students prepare for a speaking test?
3. What feedback do students receive after a speaking test? What are their views and wishes regarding the feedback on speaking tests?
4. What are the student's anxiety levels regarding the different formats of speaking tests?

To explore these questions, a mixed method design was selected: on the one hand, a questionnaire was used to survey a large number of students about their views on speaking tests; on the other hand, retrospective interviews were used to gather students' views on a specific speaking test, i. e. the filmed test. In this way, students' general views on speaking tests could be supplemented with their views on a specific test, thus counteracting one disadvantage of written surveys, namely that respondents can-

not always accurately remember the situations asked about (e. g. Jones et al., 2013). It furthermore allowed students to provide more in-depth answers than in the more superficial questionnaire (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

4.2 Participants

The questionnaire was filled in by 254 lower secondary students, 187 from the French-speaking Cantons of Fribourg and Neuchâtel and 76 from Italian-speaking Ticino. Table 1 gives an overview of the number of students per track and per grade. The large majority of students spoke the language of schooling (as one of their languages) at home, i. e. either French (84% of the students in the French-speaking cantons) or Italian (97% in Ticino). In addition to the language of schooling, 33% of all students reported speaking at least one more language at home. In some cases, this additional language was German (ten students, 4%) or Swiss German (three students, 1.2%). Most students (93%) started learning German in either 3rd or 7th grade, according to the respective curriculum, and have had German lessons ever since.

The short interview was conducted with the 84 students whose speaking tests were filmed, 62 from the French-speaking region and 22 from Ticino. All but one of the interviewed students also completed the written questionnaire. Compared to the questionnaire, the interviewed students were slightly older and there were more students from lower tracks.

Table 1: Participants of the questionnaire and the interviews

Data	n	Track	Grade	Age
Questionnaire	254	Higher: 78 (17 classes, 11 teachers)	7 th : 33 Middle: 86 Lower: 77 No track ⁷ : 13	14.2 (12–17)
Interviews	84	Higher: 15 (8 classes, 7 teachers)	7 th : 12 Middle: 14 Lower: 43 No track: 11	15.8 (12–17)

4.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was created by the authors, with a few questions based on other questionnaires (e. g. Peyer et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2018). During the development phase, the questionnaire was discussed with an expert. Once the questionnaire was finished, the German working document was translated simultaneously into French and Italian. The aim was that the French and Italian questionnaires were as similar as

⁷ In the canton of Neuchâtel, German is taught without differentiation until the end of 7th grade. It is in 8th and 9th grade that there is a higher and a lower track.

possible. For this reason, a departure from the German working document was at times necessary.

The initial questionnaire was a four-page pen-and-paper questionnaire that comprised a) five questions on background information, b) 37 statements to be answered with a 4-point Likert-type scale of agreement with one final open question and c) self-assessment with can-do descriptors from Lingualevel (Lenz & Studer, 2009) in the A1.2-B1.1 range. This initial questionnaire was piloted qualitatively in a 7th grade class in French-speaking Switzerland. For this purpose, 13 students filled in the questionnaire while sitting next to a researcher. After every set of questions, the students were asked if they understood everything or if anything was unclear or oddly worded. The students took about 8–12 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Overall, students reported almost no difficulty with the questionnaire. After the piloting, a few items were reformulated, and a few statements were exchanged for others or replaced by an open question.

The definitive questionnaire is an anonymous pen-and-paper questionnaire that was administered in the language of schooling, i.e. in French or Italian.⁸ It is four pages long, with one additional page for a self-assessment. It comprises three parts. The first part contains five questions on background information (age, gender, languages). The second and main part consists of six sets of statements, sometimes with an open question, on topics such as the general appreciation of German, preparation for exams, feelings of anxiety during exams, the usefulness of exams and feedback. In total, this part consists of 30 statements and four open questions. The statements are to be answered with a 4-point forced Likert-type scale, ranging from “agree”, to “somewhat agree”, to “somewhat disagree”, to “disagree”. Two sets of questions, pertaining to stress and usefulness of different test formats, also include the option “never done such an exam”. The third and final part is one page for self-assessment with can-do descriptors in the A1.2-B1.1 range for the French-speaking students or in the A1.1-A2.2 range for the Italian-speaking students – this self-assessment was completed by the filmed students.

4.4 Student Interviews

The students gave a short, approximately five minutes long semi-structured interview immediately following their speaking tests. The interviews were conducted in the language of schooling. The student interview was piloted with 13 students from the same class that piloted the questionnaire. Following the piloting of the interview, the questions were revised. The final student interview comprised questions on the students' awareness of or feelings towards the camera, self-evaluation, preparation for the speaking test, usefulness of speaking tests and, if time permitted, a question on what they would change about the test.

⁸ All survey instruments are available here: <https://osf.io/yv8z9>.

4.5 Teacher Interviews

The semi-structured retrospective interviews with teachers took place after the speaking tests. They were conducted online via MS Teams either on the day of or the day after the speaking test. The interviews lasted about an hour and covered the following three phases: a) the exam preparation and the task, b) the rating and c) the exam follow-up (assessment for learning, feedback). In this paper, we include the teacher's answers about exam preparation and the exam follow-up.

4.6 Data Collection

The participants were chosen by convenience sampling. The classes' teachers were recruited by cantonal authorities or by the researchers' professional network, and their participation was voluntary. The students' participation was also voluntary: parental written consent was required for filming the speaking tests and giving the short interviews and/or for filling in the questionnaire; students who were 16 or older could also give consent themselves to fill in the questionnaire. On average, 65 % of students per class were recorded and 80 % completed the questionnaire.

Data collection mostly took place between March and June 2022, with two more classes filling in the questionnaire in the early spring of 2023. Speaking tests were filmed in eight classes. While tests were being filmed, members of the research team conducted the short interviews with the filmed students – students were interviewed in pairs after paired speaking tests (73 students) or alone after individual speaking tests (11 students) – or distributed the questionnaire. The students filled in the questionnaire individually, which took them 10–15 minutes. In addition to the eight classes in which speaking tests were filmed, the questionnaire was completed by students in nine further classes.

4.7 Data Analysis

The questionnaire data was manually entered and coded. The coding of the closed items was for the most part straight forward. The only time the research team made a decision on the coding was when students checked both "agree"/"somewhat agree" or "disagree"/"somewhat disagree". In those rare instances, the "somewhat (dis)agree" option was coded. The questionnaire was fully completed by 218 students (86 % of questionnaires); in most cases, only one or two items are missing. No student was excluded from the analysis, however only students who answered all items of a set of questions were included in the analysis of that set. The quantitative data was analysed with descriptive statistics, the graphics were made with tidyverse (Wickham et al., 2019) in R (R Core Team, 2023). As the sample of participants was not representative and the overall study followed an explorative approach, no hypotheses were established, and consequently no inferential statistics calculated. The qualitative data, i. e. the answers to the open questions in the questionnaire and the interviews with students and teachers, were first transcribed and then examined following Mayring's (2015) approach to content analysis, specifically frequency analysis.

5 Results

The results of the study are presented below, organised thematically according to the four research questions, i. e. the students' views on different aspects of speaking tests (usefulness, preparation, feedback and anxiety) are discussed and contrasted with the teachers' views.

5.1 Usefulness

In the questionnaire, students indicated their agreement with statements on different test formats helping them to improve their German. As figure 2 shows, students agreed most that the format of paired speaking tests helps them improve. However, the students were overall positive about the different test formats being useful for their progress in German. This positivity is notable, as the learners in the European TALE project found oral presentations less conducive to language learning than our students (Vogt et al., 2020).

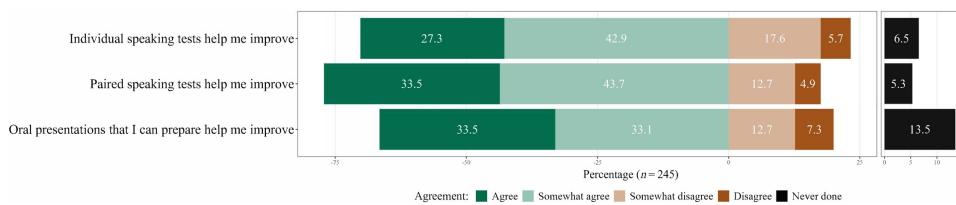


Figure 2: Results of the questionnaire on the usefulness of test formats ("... help me to improve my German") (Source: own illustration)

The students whose speaking test was filmed and who were subsequently interviewed ($n = 84$), were asked if they thought speaking tests helped them improve. Here too, many students assented, with 57% of the interviewed students finding them helpful and 23% finding them at least partially helpful, while 18% of the students did not find them helpful. Unlike the questionnaire, the interview allowed for students to explain their opinions. Their reasons for finding speaking tests (somewhat) helpful generally pertained to speaking in and of itself or to the usefulness of speaking compared to writing. The most common argument (17%) was that they could learn or practice speaking with speaking tests. The second most common argument (12%) was that they would need to speak German later in life (e. g. apprenticeship, work) or when travelling in a German speaking country – presumably, speaking tests help them prepare for this. The third most common argument (10%) was that speaking tests allowed students to practice pronunciation. Other arguments that were named by multiple students (each 6%) were first that speaking was the most fundamental part of the language, or at least more important than writing; second that speaking tests were not just about memorising, students had to work with what they knew; third that speaking tests helped students learn or review vocabulary. Students who did not find speaking tests useful had a variety of arguments against them, the most common of which was related to stress

(7%). Two further reasons were given by more than one student: the first was that they memorised things for the test they either forgot afterwards or did not understand (4%), or that the speaking tests were invented, inauthentic situations (2%).

Many of the students' arguments in favour of the usefulness of speaking tests seem to boil down to a) speaking tests are an opportunity to practice speaking or aspects of speaking, or b) speaking is important and useful, therefore speaking tests are useful. In the interviews with 12 students, after a student gave this kind of answer, one interviewer asked if speaking activities in the classroom would not be just as effective as speaking tests. Only three students maintained that speaking tests had an added benefit, either because the students stated that they spoke more during speaking tests than in classroom activities or because they considered being assessed to be a good thing. The other nine students concurred that speaking tests and classroom activities were similarly useful, with one student insisting on the importance of feedback: if she were to get feedback from the teacher in a classroom speaking activity (in her case on pronunciation), as she apparently did in the speaking test, then it would not make a difference.

The seven teachers also expressed their opinion on the usefulness of speaking tests. When asked whether they believed that speaking tests helped their students to progress in German, they expressed mixed opinions. One teacher considered speaking tests to be mainly "a source of stress and not a source of progress" for the students – she thought that other things, such as meeting a partner class from German-speaking Switzerland, would be more likely to motivate students to speak German. She also doubted that speaking tests help her students because of the inauthentic situation and because students do not make use of the feedback they receive, in her case a filled-out grid with an occasional comment. A few other teachers were also doubtful that the students used the feedback, however, they still found speaking tests useful for other reasons. Another teacher, who participated with two classes, and was thus interviewed twice, was doubtful in the first interview if the class in question (higher track, 8th grade) profited from speaking tests because the students at that age would not yet see the point in learning German. In the second interview (lower track, 9th grade), the teacher expressed her hope that students would benefit from speaking tests, adding that she thought it was important for the students to have had this experience. Four teachers viewed speaking tests as a means of pressure or external source of motivation, saying that speaking tests helped students to progress because students studied more for tests than for regular class. However, two of these teachers added the caveat that this was only true for higher track German classes and not the lower track classes with which they participated. The other two teachers, who also participated with lower track classes, maintained that speaking tests helped these students to progress because students are more "motivated" and "put in more effort" or "study more seriously". The final teacher argued differently: he thinks that speaking tests are more useful than any other type of test. For one thing, they allow the students to become aware of their level, specifically if they could or could not interact in an everyday situation. Consequently, he expected students either to feel assured or to realise that they have to work harder to

reach the required level. For another thing, he could give students immediate feedback or even help them during the test.

5.2 Preparation

One of the teachers' arguments in favour of the usefulness of speaking tests – and that of a few students as well – was that students studied more before a test. In other words, the preparation for the test was conducive to students learning. In the interviews, the teachers were asked about the preparation for the (filmed) test. The teachers prepared their classes more or less intensely for the speaking tests. On the one side, one teacher did a mock test with her class. On the other side, one teacher used parts of two lessons to not only familiarise the students with the test task but also review the topic of the test (describing a daily schedule) which had been covered some months earlier.

In the questionnaire, the students indicated that their teachers informed them of the topic and learning objectives of the speaking exams in class. In fact, this was the item with the highest agreement in the questionnaire. Though students definitely agreed that they had been told the learning objectives by their teachers, students were less likely to know them and even less sure about how to prepare for speaking tests.

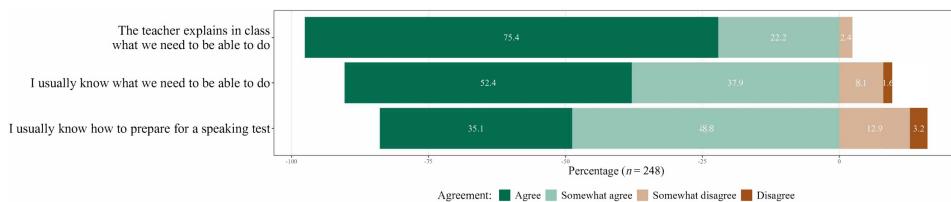


Figure 3: Results of the questionnaire on how students know the learning goals for speaking tests (Source: own illustration)

The next question in the survey was how students prepare for speaking tests in German. Since this was an open question, multiple answers were possible. Of the 244 students who answered the question, 32 % students said that they studied or reviewed vocabulary. 19 % of the students indicated that they studied with a family member, usually with their parents. 17 % each mentioned either revision without stating what exactly they reviewed or reviewing and preparing sentences or questions that they expect to say during the speaking test. 12 % of the students prepare by writing a text, basically a script of their test talk, and some of them also explicitly stated that they also memorise the written text. Further answers given by multiple students were that they practiced speaking, e. g. by speaking aloud (8 %), that they memorise things (8 %) – it is often unclear what exactly students memorise, but in many cases it seems to be a document they received from the teacher, perhaps containing the most important phrases for the test – that they read the learning objectives (7 %), that they (re)do exercises, e. g. in the coursebook (6 %), they study with friends/classmates (5 %) or another unidentified person (4 %), they focus on practicing their pronunciation (4 %), or they refer to the

preparation done in the classroom (4%). 6% of the students wrote that they do nothing to prepare for speaking tests.

In the short interview, the students ($n = 84$) were asked how they had prepared for the (filmed) test they had just passed. There is less variety in the answers in the interviews than in the questionnaire. In the interviews, the most common answer was that they had reviewed sentences or questions that they would or could use during the exam (32%). The second most common answer was that they reviewed the vocabulary (30%). Students also stated that they had studied with family members, mostly their parents (21%) or with a friend/classmate (19%).

5.3 Feedback

For learners to benefit from feedback on tests, they need to receive more than just a grade. Indeed, according to Black and Wiliam (1998b), feedback should provide students with information on how to improve. In the interviews, the teachers talked about the feedback they were going to give their students after the speaking test. All teachers gave them their grade. Five of the seven teachers also gave the students the filled-in grid, which may contain a written comment or two (e. g. a mistake). There was however doubt among teachers, based on their experience, that students (know how to) use the feedback for further learning, with one teacher mentioning that this was less of an issue in the higher track classes. Three teachers offered the students the opportunity to ask questions about the test or the grade. One teacher always briefly talks to every student individually to explain the points in the grid and the grade. Here too, some teachers said that students are mainly interested in getting their grade and if they ask questions after the test, it is to understand why they did not get more points or to argue for a better grade. Other feedback that teachers offered their students was the opportunity to listen to the audio recording of the test, however students never took the teacher up on this. Another teacher said in the interview that he would try a new way of giving feedback: he planned on listening to the recording with the students and then giving them feedback. Furthermore, one teacher always gave the entire class feedback by commenting on a few mistakes she had heard during the tests. Two teachers also took note of a specific grammar point that they considered to be important and where they frequently observed students having made errors; they would then work on this grammar point in the weeks following the test or during the end-of-year revision. Two teachers also mentioned that they use the feedback to encourage anxious students or the entire class.

In the questionnaire, students were asked what type of feedback they would like to receive after speaking tests; they were also asked to motivate their answers. As figure 4 shows, students indicated that they would like to receive all sorts of feedback, with tips on how to improve being the most popular. The students' reasons for wanting any or all types of feedback were related to using the feedback to improve. The least favoured amongst the types of feedback was the teacher's feedback on the entire class's performance, some students arguing that they did not care or need to know about the other students' performances.

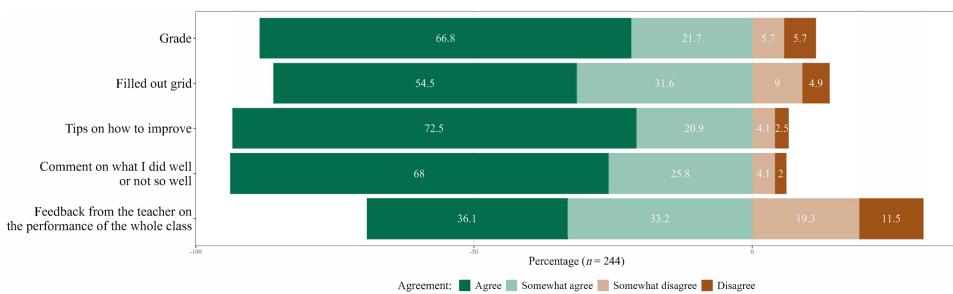


Figure 4: Type of feedback students would like to receive after speaking tests (Source: own illustration)

In a further, open question, the students were asked what they did with the feedback they received from their teachers. Multiple answers were possible. When analysing these responses, it is important to consider that not all students receive the same kind or the same amount of feedback. Nevertheless, their answers ($n = 244$) fall into three categories⁹: a) using the feedback for future learning (57%), b) looking at the feedback (30%), c) not using the feedback (19%). Within the first category of students using the feedback for future learning, there were different degrees of specificity in the answers. Many gave vague answers such as "I improve"; some students said that they would learn from mistakes or other things they did not do so well in the test; fewer students mention putting in work to improve, e.g. "I look at where I have to improve the most and I practice at home and try to improve". Finally, some students indicated that they used the feedback for the (preparation of) the next speaking test. Within the second category of students looking at the feedback, there were also different degrees of specificity. Here, most say that they look at mistakes and weaknesses – only three students also looked at the positive points, i.e. at what went well or their strengths – with some other students simply indicating that they look at the feedback without any further details. The last category of students, who do not use the feedback, either answered directly that they do nothing with the feedback or gave an answer that made clear that they do not use the feedback for further learning, e.g. putting it in a binder, showing their parents or saying that they are happy if it is positive feedback and disappointed if it is negative feedback. Overall, the responses suggest that many students understand that feedback can promote further learning. However, the often very vague statements also suggest that the students rarely (are able to) incorporate the feedback into their learning, thus also raising the question as to how actionable teacher feedback is for the students.

5.4 Anxiety

In the questionnaire, the students were specifically asked about their feelings of anxiety in different test formats. As figure 5 (line 3-7) shows, students overall report feeling anxious or stressed¹⁰ during speaking tests. Of the two test formats that students were

9 Some answers were assigned both to the first category (use for future learning) and to the second (look at feedback).

10 The French and Italian questionnaire used the word "stressé-e" and "stressato/a" to describe a feeling of test anxiety.

asked about, individual or paired tests, students feel less anxiety during paired speaking tests – as mentioned above, this was also the test format students found the most useful. Other factors that may influence feelings of anxiety were also included in the questionnaire. Of these, students were most anxious when taking the test in the classroom with the other students present. Most students in our sample have some experience in taking a test in the classroom, as this is how the teachers in our study usually administer speaking tests, for different reasons: classroom management, i. e. to make sure students stay in the room and behave, as well as a kind of preparation for the end of school exam that takes place in a room with other students also taking the test, or practicing presentation skills and speaking in front of people. Another factor that was likely to stress students was not having any preparation time; fortunately for the students, in the (filmed) tests, they were accorded some time before the test. It is interesting to note that a comparison between students of the lower and the other tracks shows that the lower track students tended to report less anxiety while speaking in class or during tests. Furthermore, a comparison between male and female students revealed a tendency for girls to be more anxious than boys in all of the assessment situations mentioned in figure 5. This is in line with previous studies (Ericksson & Gustafsson, 2005; Gursoy & Arman, 2016). In Ericksson and Gustafsson's (2005) study, girls indicated more frequently to feel nervous, most of all in formal testing situations, but also in classroom assessment.

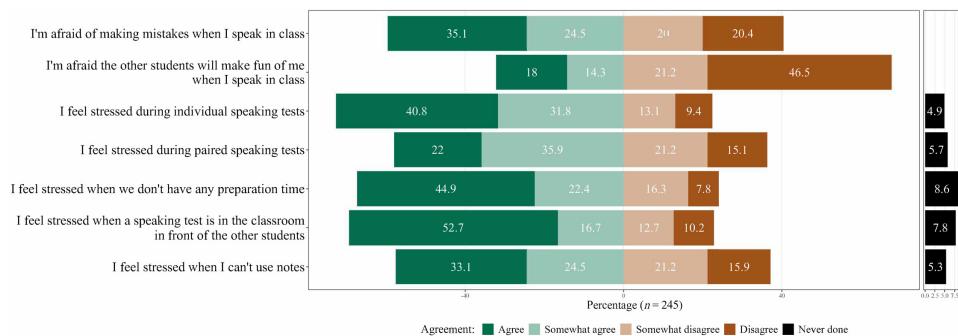


Figure 5: Reported test anxiety (Source: own illustration)

Anxiety is clearly an issue on students' minds when it comes to speaking tests. In the last question of the questionnaire, students were asked what else they would like to say about speaking tests in German. 43 (17 %) of all 254 students spontaneously wrote how stressful they find speaking tests. While students did not provide further details, five students indicated that they find it particularly stressful when speaking tests take place in the classroom with the other students present.

6 Discussion

This study investigated students' views on German as a foreign language tests at lower secondary level. 254 learners completed a questionnaire on exam preparation, usefulness, feedback and anxiety, and 84 learners were interviewed immediately after a speaking test. In order to identify possible differences in the perceptions of teachers and learners, their teachers ($n = 7$) were also interviewed. It should be kept in mind that this is a non-representative convenience sample, as the number of participants (especially participating classes) is limited and that participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis. Thus, the participating students are most likely taught by teachers who had a measure of confidence in the assessment of speaking. For the above reasons, the results cannot be generalised, and further research is necessary to solidify the results. Nonetheless, we believe that the results reveal valid tendencies. The results thus provide information about current views and practices and serve as a basis for further discussion and research.

In the following, the results of the present study will be discussed with reference to the research questions, and possible discrepancies between students' and teachers' views are pointed out. The first research question pertained to how useful students find various speaking test formats. The analysis of the students' questionnaire showed that two thirds of the learners have positive attitudes towards speaking tests, with paired speaking tests being considered the most useful test format – 77 % of the students say they (tend to) benefit from them. Students who were interviewed directly after a speaking test also found speaking tests (rather) useful for progressing in German in 80 % of cases. The interviewed students explained their positive opinions mainly by saying that speaking tests helped them to improve their speaking skills and that they needed to be able to speak German (later) in life. Hence, they mostly gave reasons for the importance of practicing speaking, rather than for speaking tests themselves. The learners in our study thus show similar views to those of Erickson and Gustafsson (2005), who appreciated language assessment that was applicable in daily life and often emphasised a wish for oral proficiency. The teachers expressed mixed opinions regarding the usefulness of speaking tests. Although a majority of the teachers views speaking tests as a means of getting students to study more, some specify that this is only true for higher track classes. Some teachers were also doubtful if students used the feedback they receive. The view of tests as a necessary external source of motivation was also expressed by some students as well as by learners of other studies (see Vavla & Gokaj, 2013; Agcam & Babanoglu, 2016). This perception of tests as an external source of motivation may point to shortcomings with German as a foreign language teaching in Switzerland. Although a compulsory subject from 3rd grade onwards, German is in a difficult position alongside the more popular English: pupils make only slow progress and lose their intrinsic motivation to learn it over the years.

As mentioned above, the majority of teachers in our study thought that the students study more before a test. This ties into the second research question of whether students are aware of the learning objectives and know how to prepare for a speaking

exam. Although the overwhelming majority of students indicated that they were generally informed of the learning goals by their teachers (75 % agreed, 22 % somewhat agreed), only half of the learners usually know the goals (52 %) and even fewer (35 %) usually know how to prepare for speaking tests. This difference between the 'what' (the learning objectives) and the 'how' (knowing how to prepare to fulfil them) is striking and a point that teachers should address in order to make speaking tests as useful and stress-free as possible for learners. After all, if students do not know how best to prepare for a test, it is likely that they study less and are perhaps also more nervous during the exam.

The third research question was concerned with the feedback students receive and would like to receive after speaking tests. For speaking tests to be an opportunity for learning, learners should be given feedback that contains concrete tips for improvement. When asked what kind of feedback they would like to receive, the students in our study indicated all sorts of feedback, with comments on how to improve being the most popular. The students also mostly explained their wish for any feedback with wanting to use it for improvement. However, the feedback that students – according to their teachers – receive after a test, rarely seems to contain concrete tips on how a student can improve. This discrepancy between students' wishes and teachers' practices is reminiscent of Vogt et al.'s (2020) and Tarnanen and Huhta's (2012) studies, in which discrepancies between teachers' and students' perception of the frequency of individual feedback on how to improve learning were found. However, the results of our study not only show a discrepancy between students' wishes and teachers' practices but also regarding students' self-perception and the teachers' perception of them: some of the teachers in our study doubted that students are interested in using feedback to improve. They mention that students are mainly interested in getting their grade and usually only ask questions after the test to understand why they did not get more points. The teachers furthermore expressed doubts that students know how to use the feedback for further learning (for similar views of teachers, see also Tarnanen & Huhta, 2012). This could indicate that the students are either not motivated enough and/or do not have the ability and self-reflection to set themselves goals and consider how they can best be achieved. However, the analysis of the teacher interviews indicates that the feedback they give after the exams is often not individual, rather unspecific (i. e. not goal-oriented enough) and contains few concrete examples on how to improve.

Since oral exams can cause anxiety, which in turn can affect students' performance (e. g. Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012), our fourth research question asked how stressed students feel during different formats of speaking tests. While a majority of students overall report feeling (somewhat) anxious during speaking tests, clear differences between the individual and paired formats were found: while 41 % of students are clearly stressed during individual tests, this proportion is only about half as high (22 %) for paired tests. This finding is in line with Fulcher's study (1996) in which adolescent EFL learners were less anxious prior to a group discussion than prior to one-to-one interviews. However, the biggest stress factor, according to our study, is taking the test in front of the whole class: 53 % of students are clearly stressed in this setting. Teachers often stated during

the interviews that they conducted speaking tests in the classroom with the other students present in order to avoid disciplinary problems. However, given the large number of stressed students, it would certainly be desirable for teachers to use other exam settings more often, such as testing in a different room or having students make recordings of their discussions which teachers could evaluate later. Against the background of studies that show negative correlations between anxiety and oral test performance (e. g. Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012), it seems vital to help students to be relieved from anxiety and nervousness during oral tests. Furthermore, as Butler et al. (2021) emphasise, it would generally be important to pay more attention to the role of affect and its influence on language assessment.

7 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to shed light on an under-researched aspect of language assessment: the views of learners as arguably the most important stakeholders. By combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, we hope to have shown that it is worthwhile considering the opinions and wishes of secondary school students. Although the results of our study cannot be generalised to other contexts due to non-representative convenience sampling, they can nevertheless provide indications of how teachers can make speaking tests as anxiety-free and learner-oriented as possible. The discrepancies found between teachers' and learners' views furthermore point to a need for more communication about assessment between teachers and learners, which should hopefully lead to students knowing better how to prepare for a speaking exam. The results also point to a need for teacher training and professional development especially in providing learner-oriented feedback before or after speaking tests. Further research into students' perspectives on speaking tests is necessary to bolster and add to our findings. There are still many open questions about how students, especially teenagers in compulsory education, experience speaking tests. It would, for example, be interesting to research if students' views remain somewhat stable or if with more experience, i. e. after more speaking tests, their views may change. With a large-scale representative sample, the question of teacher or class effects on students' views could also be addressed. Combined with teacher profiles, this may provide best practices for teachers and their classroom with regard to speaking tests, which could contribute to making speaking tests as anxiety-free and useful as possible for students.

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