Young learners' perspectives on English classroom interaction

Foreign language anxiety and sense of agency in Swedish primary school

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Abstract
This thesis explores young language learners’ experiences of classroom interaction in English instruction, focusing on foreign language anxiety (FLA), sense of agency and learner beliefs, aiming to inform and problematize language pedagogy for young learners. Learners from ten classrooms in years 2–5 participated. Study I focused on levels and triggers of FLA, by means of a learners’ questionnaire about common language classroom practices. Findings revealed that 18% of learners frequently felt anxious during English lessons and that these negative emotions centered on speaking in class. With this study serving as a baseline, the following two studies investigated learners’ beliefs about language learning and teaching, as well as their actual experiences of classroom communication during English lessons, using recorded group discussions among learners with similar levels of FLA. Study II compared learners in one year 3 classroom, with many frequently anxious learners, whereas study III centered on learners with recurrent anxiety across seven classrooms, in years 2–5.

Together, the studies illustrate young language learners’ beliefs, and how they perceive and position themselves in relation to English instruction. In general, learners expressed positive attitudes to the English subject and the teaching. Regardless of anxiety levels, learners stressed the importance of extensive English input and for learners to guess and dare to speak. Learners who experienced recurrent FLA were confronted with three dilemmas that reduced their sense of agency. Incomprehensible English input made it difficult for them to follow instructions and understand what they were expected to say or respond to. Furthermore, the fear of social exposure and negative reactions made them prefer to remain silent and refrain from speaking or pose questions. Nevertheless, these learners favored whole class instruction, as they relied heavily on teacher support, and feared falling behind during individual work, although this setting sparked FLA.

The findings foreground the interaction of social, cognitive and emotional processes of language learning and the development of learners’ sense of agency in the classroom. The strong consensus and many recurrent themes expressed across classrooms, related to language use, instructions and organization, suggest that the findings may have bearing beyond these ten specific classroom contexts. The perspectives of primary school learners themselves are valuable in the development of age-appropriate language teaching that strives to foster motivation and a sense of agency, while countering the development of FLA. The thesis hopes to inspire academic and professional discussion about how to best organize English instruction that benefits all young learners, with varying language proficiencies in the same classroom.

Keywords: Early language instruction, young learners, foreign language anxiety, agency, learner beliefs, target language use, classroom interaction.

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Maria Nilsson
To my daughters
Ronja, Saga and Freya.
Acknowledgment

Doctoral studies have been an adventure. I have learnt so much about myself, about learners and learning, about research and teaching. It has been challenging, uncertain and stressful at times, but always fun.

Although it may feel so at times, doctoral studies are not a lonely endeavor. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Camilla Bardel and Christina Hedman. Thank you for your guidance and unwavering support, and your honest and constructive questions. You have challenged me and pushed me to sharpen my thinking. I have always looked forward to our supervision sessions.

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I am indebted to the teachers who invited me into their classroom to initiate this project. The photo on the cover of this thesis, taken on campus at Stockholm University, reminds me of the young learners that participated in the studies. Gardening is often compared to teaching, in the strive to offer plants, or learners, optimal conditions to grow and reach their various potentials. A closer look at the photo reveals great variation in the shapes and colors of the leaves, as diverse as any classroom full of children, whose experiences and preferences are both alike and diverse, and which make teaching fascinating, and challenging. I wish to thank all the learners who generously contributed to the current thesis.

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## Abbreviations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CLIL</td>
<td>Content and language integrated learning</td>
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<td>CLT</td>
<td>Communicative language teaching</td>
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<td>EYL</td>
<td>English for young learners</td>
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<td>FLA</td>
<td>Foreign language anxiety</td>
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<tr>
<td>FLCAS</td>
<td>Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>First language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QCA</td>
<td>Qualitative content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBLT</td>
<td>Task based language teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>TL</td>
<td>Target language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YLL</td>
<td>Young language learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>ZPD</td>
<td>Zone of proximal development</td>
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1. Introduction

1.1 Aims
This research project, as a whole, is guided by two principle aims. The primary aim is to enhance our understanding of how young learners make sense of, perceive, and respond to oral communication during English classes in primary school. To this end, beliefs about and experiences of language learning are explored, with a special focus on those who often feel nervous and hesitant about interacting in English, to shed light on foreign language anxiety (FLA) and sense of agency in early language instruction. Furthermore, as the thesis is embedded in the field of language education, a secondary aim is to inform and problematize the teaching of English for young learners (EYL). Therefore, the thesis investigates how current issues related to communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches in primary school align with, and find support in the perspectives and concerns of young learners.

1.2 Background
The complex process of language learning involves not only cognition but also psychological and affective dimensions, such as motivation and self-confidence (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Williams et al., 2015). Interacting with individual factors, a range of social and contextual variables come into play, that have direct or indirect bearing on learner behavior, their sense of agency and their learning (Gkonou, 2015; van Lier, 2013). When the target language (TL) is taught in a formal setting, within a classroom context, such variables involve, for example, the use and organization of activities, the way the TL is used, the level of challenge, the feedback and the atmosphere. Furthermore, most teachers face groups with learners that are heterogeneous, both with regard to their proficiency levels but also in the way that individual learners approach and respond to classroom instruction. Hence, catering to all the different needs in a group of learners may be a challenging task. Whereas some learners engage with motivation, confidence and enthusiasm, others are more reluctant and prefer to remain quiet.
I myself was a quiet learner, especially during language lessons. I did not want to make a fool of myself and say something that was not correct in front of all the others. Although it was never discussed, I assumed that the purpose of the teaching was for learners to absorb vocabulary and grammar rules and produce speech and writing that would pass without correction. Years later, as a teacher of Swedish, English and Spanish, in years 3–9, I met many learners, a few in each classroom, who avoided speaking, sometimes raised their hands but “forgot” what they wanted to say once they were called on, or spoke in a hardly audible voice. A few lower secondary students felt so anxious that they would go blank and be unable to access their knowledge. Teaching university courses for future teachers of English, I have had students write me notes explaining that they will not be speaking a lot during my seminars, due to previous negative experiences from their early learning of English in school, which they have not yet overcome.

Another issue that has caught my attention, is how teachers balance the use of the target language, English, and the first language (L1), Swedish, in the classroom. Such choices affect the teaching and also the emotional responses among learners. In my earlier bachelor study (Nilsson, 2013) involving observations and interviews with four English teachers in years 2 and 3, all participants pointed out the intricate task of teaching groups of 20–30 learners with varying proficiency in English and the delicate balance of offering support and challenge to all students, aiming to teach within the learners’ zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978). The teachers highlighted the paramount importance of maintaining the interest of their learners, fostering confidence and avoiding frustration. Consequently, language choice was an important consideration for them, this being held to have direct effect on the level of difficulty that they presented their learners with. They were all aware of anxious learners in their classrooms, and argued that for these learners, too much incomprehensible input caused frustration or made them lose their concentration, whereas including some L1 in the instruction was considered one way of preventing or reducing such anxiety. Although they balanced the use of the two languages quite differently, they discussed the rationale behind their choices in much the same ways, and brought up the consideration for anxious learners as a key factor.

These findings and my own teaching experiences suggested FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986) to be a phenomenon that has bearing on early foreign language instruction, on many levels. Most importantly, feeling anxious in class is a problem for the individual learner, which can easily become a vicious cycle affecting performance and self-confidence, with potentially long-term effects.
on the learning process (MacIntyre, 2017; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). Furthermore, if the presence of anxious learners affects the way the lessons are run and the amount of target language used, FLA has consequences for all learners in the classroom.

Several circumstances justify the current thesis. Firstly, although more and more young learners across the globe study English in school, the primary school context is under-researched (Garton & Copland, 2019; Muñoz, 2017). FLA is generally held to develop from early experiences of language instruction. Yet, studies illustrating such experiences are scarce. Secondly, the voices of children themselves are gaining increasing attention, illustrated by the fact that the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child was adopted as Swedish law in January 2020, stating that the perspectives of children should be considered in matters that concern them. Thirdly, the role of emotion in language learning has been brought to the fore. This affective turn (Pavlenko, 2013) in the field of applied linguistics generates new research topics. Finally, researchers have directed attention to the problems associated with the use of teaching approaches in early English instruction that were originally developed for adults (Enever, 2018; Garton & Copland, 2019). The advancement of language pedagogy for YLLs needs to be firmly grounded in an understanding of the cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development of children, as well as the context of instruction.

1.3 Research questions
In response to the circumstances outlined in the previous section, the current project is based on the perspectives of young learners themselves, their learner beliefs and their experiences, to advance our understanding of this learner group and of foreign language instruction in primary school. Two overarching research questions guide the thesis. The first question centers on the learners, whereas the second focuses on early English instruction:

- How do young learners in the Swedish context experience English teaching and oral communication, particularly in relation to FLA and sense of agency, and how do these experiences align with their language learner beliefs?
- How do the experiences and beliefs of these young learners correspond to implications for teaching practices stemming from contemporary research on EYL?
The first research question will be addressed by combining the findings from the three studies included in the thesis project. The second research question will be investigated by comparing the expressed needs and concerns of learners in these studies, to findings from other recent research that has instead approached EYL by focusing on outcomes and classroom observations.

The thesis foregrounds the perspectives of young learners who frequently experience FLA in the English classroom. It does, however, not attempt to uncover the underlying reasons why some learners are more prone to negative emotions than others. Circumstances possibly related to FLA may involve psychological and personal characteristics, such as shyness or perfectionism, but also proficiency, the number and age of siblings, parental expectations and attitudes, experiences of going abroad or gaming and so forth (for overviews, see Dewaele, 2017; MacIntyre, 2017). These underlying factors, over which teachers have little control, are beyond the scope of the current thesis. Instead, the aim is to increase our understanding of aspects related to practices and situations that spark negative emotions. In other words, the thesis aims to direct attention to the prevalence of FLA in primary school classrooms and aspects of counteracting negative emotion and fostering a sense of agency in learners, that teachers may impact.

1.4 Studies I–III

The thesis comprises three studies (see Table 1). Study I is a quantitative study that investigates negative emotions in relation to common English classroom situations among 225 learners, aged 8–12, in ten Swedish primary school classrooms. Study II is a qualitative study, based on a subset of these 225 young learners, that explores learners’ beliefs about, and experiences of, English instruction among the learners in the classroom where FLA was most common. Study III focuses on beliefs, experiences and sense of agency in frequently anxious learners in seven of the remaining classrooms.
Table 1

Overview of studies I–III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Study I</th>
<th>Study II</th>
<th>Study III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Ten classrooms</td>
<td>One classroom</td>
<td>Seven classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Years 2–5</td>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>Years 2–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ages 8–12</td>
<td>Ages 9–10</td>
<td>Ages 8–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>225 learners</td>
<td>26 learners</td>
<td>31 learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Learner questionnaire</td>
<td>Learner group discussions</td>
<td>Learner group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Levels and triggers of FLA (foreign language anxiety)</td>
<td>Language learner beliefs and experiences</td>
<td>Language learner beliefs, experiences and sense of agency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This chapter has stated the overall aims of the thesis. The following three chapters will offer contextual and theoretical background. Chapter 2 discusses the role of children in society, education and research, and the assumptions that underpin the present project. In Chapter 3 the Swedish educational context and the role of EYL in Sweden, both in and out of school, are presented. Subsequently, Chapter 4 reviews and examines previous studies and literature involving young learners, in relation to FLA, learner beliefs and sense of agency. In addition, issues of teaching approaches for early English education are addressed. After these background chapters, Chapter 5 outlines the theories and concepts framing the present thesis. In Chapter 6, the methodological considerations behind the studies are provided. Chapter 7 answers the first research question, by summarizing the findings of each study and presenting aggregated findings, as well as methodological limitations of all three studies. Finally, findings are discussed in Chapter 8, where the second research question is also addressed. Moreover, theoretical and practical contributions, as well as new research ideas generated by the thesis, are presented. A Swedish summary, Chapter 9, concludes the thesis.
2. Young learners

This chapter will present some assumptions that underpin the current thesis, concerning children as agents, language learners and research participants. The term young learners is sometimes used in reference to any learner below the age of 18. In this thesis, however, the term refers to children in primary school, aged 6/7–12/13, which is a common definition (G. Ellis, 2014).

2.1 Children as agents

Towards the end of the last century, a new sociological orientation, referred to as the sociology of childhood, emerged as a reaction to the way children had previously been regarded and theorized (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Qvortrup (1994), among others, criticized the inability to regard children as human beings and instead as rather incomplete and incompetent “human becomings” (p. 2). In 1989, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was passed. This document establishes that children’s perspectives should be heard and considered in all matters that concern them, and became part of Swedish law in 2020 (SFS 2018:1197).

The values of the Convention on the Rights of the Child also permeate the national policy documents of compulsory education in Sweden. The curriculum, Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2018), stipulates that all learners should be encouraged and empowered to voice their own opinions and exercise influence in all matters that concern their schooling. Therefore, all teachers should act according to the assumption that learners are willing and able to take responsibility for their learning and allow them to execute such influence. Other democratic values in Lgr11 refer to equality, tolerance, solidarity, open discussions and critical thinking. The curriculum also stresses that apart from academic achievement, education should aim to contribute to the harmonious development and well-being of each individual learner.
2.2 Children as learners of a foreign language

As a group, young learners are both similar to, and different from, adults. Naturally, children have limited life experience and are continuously and rapidly developing their cognitive, psychological, physical, linguistic, social and emotional functions (G. Ellis, 2014). Yet, Alderson et al. (2005) suggest that in many ways young people act and think rather similarly to adults. The authors therefore warn against the assumption that children are very different from adults, but also, the idea that there are no differences.

Moreover, by definition, the generalizations used to describe child and learner development, hide the great variation among them. Children, as individuals, are as unique as adults (Alderson et al., 2005). In fact, in the case of foreign language learning, Mihaljević Djigunović (2017) adds that differences among young learners may be larger than among adult students. Similarly, Bailey (2017) refers to the “wildly disparate” (p. 35) character of the cognitive and socio-emotional maturity among young learners of the same age. With this heterogeneity in mind, there are, nevertheless, developmental tendencies that are interesting to consider. During primary school, peers become more important, and by the ages of 10 and 11, many children become increasingly self-aware and have a more realistic idea about their performance compared to those of their classmates (Lundberg, 2007; Mihaljević Djigunović & Lopriore, 2011; Muñoz, 2014).

Research involving YLLs has often focused on factors related to age. The common belief underpinning the growing interest in language instruction for young learners globally have been that children learn languages easily, which has led to the beliefs that “younger equals better” (Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019, p. 30). Furthermore, children are expected to be uninhibited, motivated, curious and positive (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019), and therefore less likely to experience FLA (e.g., Edelenbos et al., 2006; Johnstone et al., 2009; Keaveney & Lundberg, 2014). However, the assumption that younger equals better, and, more specifically, that starting English instruction at an early age would lead to long-term advantages for achieving language proficiency, has been rebutted (Baumert et al., 2020; Cadierno et al., 2020; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). In addition, studies have found evidence that not all YLLs are positive towards English instruction (Muñoz, 2014, 2017) and that initial enthusiasm may be short-lived (Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). Furthermore, contrary to previous assumptions, FLA is prevalent also in the primary language classroom (e.g., Liu & Chen, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). Generalizations about early
language instruction are therefore simplistic (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Muñoz, 2017; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016).

First of all, as previously mentioned, language learners of any age group are not homogeneous. Children undergo continuous and idiosyncratic changes (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009, 2015). Thus, the cognitive, psychological, social and linguistic dimensions of young learners cannot simply be translated into chronological age.

Secondly, environmental factors are today increasingly acknowledged (Enever, 2018; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016). Obviously, in the case of foreign language learning within a formal setting, both the quality and the quantity of instruction are important variables. Certain attitudinal or motivational features of young learners have been associated to specific age groups when they are in fact more impacted by context (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016, 2019). Whereas adults may be motivated by long-term ambitions and goals, children’s motivation relates primarily to their present experiences of here and now (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2016). Moreover, the holistic and utilitarian approach to language learning among YLLs in general makes them rely heavily on the immediate contextual affordances to support meaning-making (R. Ellis, 2020; Pinter, 2017). Thus, contextual variables that interact with age factors, such as classroom atmosphere and conditions, the teaching, the teacher, and the activities are of outmost importance and need to offer qualitative instruction appropriate to their levels of maturity (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). The present thesis hopes to help inform such developments.

2.3 Teaching approaches for YLLs

With the globally widespread pressure from parents, stakeholders and policy makers to provide English teaching, the question is not whether to offer English as a foreign language in primary school or not, but rather to focus on how to improve the conditions of early foreign language instruction (Enever, 2018; Garton & Copland, 2019). In recent years, scholars have argued for the need to reconsider the uncritical adoption of approaches such as CLT or TBLT that have been developed for adult learners (Copland & Ni, 2019; Enever, 2018; Garton & Copland, 2019; Ohashi, 2015). Such teaching practices cannot simply be copied but must be evaluated in relation to the needs and the interests of the learners and be modified or developed to suit the age group. (These aspects will be discussed further in Section 4.4).
While motivation has previously been regarded as an individual prerequisite for learning, national policy documents nowadays stress the objectives of fostering positive attitudes and sustaining motivation (Enever, 2018; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). Scholars argue that primary education needs to rest on a holistic view of children, which means that emotional needs of feeling safe, being heard and developing a sense of agency must be met (Copland & Ni, 2019; Dufva, 2013; Kumpulainen et al., 2014). Such conditions are also thought to counteract FLA (Copland & Ni, 2019; Enever, 2018; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019).

2.4 Young learners in research

Although most learners of English around the world are children or adolescents (G. Ellis, 2014), the field of EYL is under-researched. There may be several reasons for this. For instance, reflecting on research on children in general, Alderson et al. (2005) concluded that “for too long we have assumed that children have nothing of interest or importance to tell us about their lives and that we adults understand much better than they what is good for them and how events impact them” (p. 18). Furthermore, the belief that YLLs constitute a homogeneous group, may possibly explain the scarcity of research on differences among them (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2016). Moreover, a common idea has been that children do not yet have the cognitive, communicative or social skills to participate in research (Mayall, 2000; Scott, 2000).

In reality, young learners are in fact capable of providing reliable information if approached in ways that engage and empower them, and address issues that are meaningful to them (Scott, 2000). From the age of around 7, children develop their awareness of self and language learning, as well as their ability to reflect and elaborate on these issues (Mihaljević Djigunović & Lopriore, 2011). Increasingly, children are therefore viewed as valuable and capable subjects and active social actors whose voices should be heard and considered, rather than objects of research (Alderson et al., 2005; Pinter & Zandian, 2015; Saarinen & Kumpulainen, 2014).

Studies involving children require important methodological and ethical considerations, although, as pointed out by Alderson et al. (2005), many aspects such as power dynamics, social desirability and interpretation of qualitative data are just as important when conducting research with adults. At the same time, adults must acknowledge children’s vulnerability and need
of protection (Resnik, 2018). The rights of children do not therefore reduce adult responsibilities to “enable their social participation in ways consistent with their understandings, interests and ways of communicating, especially in the issues that most directly affect their lives” (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008, p. 35). In the same way adults are considered to be able and active agents under the favorable circumstances, children are “potentially competent social actors” (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 256). Crucially, the adult position of those who conduct (and read) research must be acknowledged. Therefore, as pointed out by James (2007), the aim to represent children’s perspectives must be regarded an ambition, that guides the analysis and the representations of the findings, rather than a factual statement. Hence, issues related to ethics and methodology are interconnected, and must be carefully considered (Powell, 2012). Nonetheless, as argued by Powell and Smith (2009), not conducting research with children may also be considered unethical, denying young learners the opportunity to participate and voice their perspectives. (Ethical considerations informing the research project will be further discussed in Chapter 6.)

Several researchers have highlighted the need for more studies on learner perspectives. For instance, Swain and Deters (2007) call for scholars to advance our understanding of the perspective of language learners, by approaching the issue from a variety of theoretical viewpoints, and “perhaps most of all, by listening to the stories of the learners, and by observing them as they move through their complex worlds” (p. 831). On the same note, Pianta et al. (2016) argue that the time has come “to shift our attention to children's and teachers' everyday experiences in classrooms, and to put those experiences at the core of what we mean by quality in early education” (p. 131). Closely related to the present thesis, Mihaljević Djigunović (2016) calls for more studies on the perspectives and perceptions of YLLs and how classroom practices affect their FLA and learners’ willingness to interact.

The issues outlined in this chapter have bearing on the current thesis, where the participants are YLLs, and also participants in research. The following chapter will move on to consider the context of the studies, namely English instruction in Swedish primary school.
3. Context

This chapter aims to contextualize the thesis project by describing the Swedish school context and the role of English in Swedish society, as well as in mandatory education. As English is an integrated part of the daily lives of many young learners, a final section addresses out-of-school exposure to the target language.

3.1 English in Sweden

According to the Swedish Language Act (SFS 2009:600) Swedish is the main language of Sweden, although this legal document also positions Sweden as a linguistically diverse society. Indeed, many languages are used among the population (Språkrådet, 2014).

English enjoys a high status, with its strong presence in the media (Enever, 2018; Sundqvist, 2020) and as part of everyday life in many professional and academic fields (Sylvén, 2019). International surveys also reveal a high English language proficiency in the population, placing Sweden in the top positions in international surveys (European Commission, 2012; EF, 2019).

3.2 The Swedish school system

Swedish mandatory schooling encompasses ten years. Children start in the preschool class the year they turn 6, and finish after year 9 (which is thus their tenth school year), at age 15/16, when the great majority continue to upper secondary school (Sundqvist, 2020). Of all compulsory schools, 17% are independent and the rest are municipal (Ekonomifakta, 2019). They are all, however, free of charge and governed by the same policy documents.
3.3 English in Swedish primary school

English has been taught as the first foreign language in mandatory education since 1962, when it replaced German (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014). In the current curriculum, Lgr11, English is positioned as a core subject, along with mathematics and Swedish/Swedish as a second language (Skolverket, 2018). In total, a minimum of 480 hours are allocated to English instruction throughout the ten years of schooling, which equates 7% of the total hours of instruction guaranteed to all learners.

English is introduced from year 3, at the latest. However, as in most European countries, the majority of schools have lowered the starting age to the first or second year, or even preschool (Enever, 2018). By the end of year 3 learners should have received 60 hours of English instruction (3.2% of the total lesson time). In years 4–6, another 220 hours are allocated to English instruction (9.7% of the total lesson time). In years 6 and 9, there are national exams in English. Grades are awarded from year 6.

The syllabus for English is clearly inspired and influenced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001), defining core content in terms of reception, production and interaction (Lundberg, 2016). In years 1–3 the core content specified in the syllabus centers around topics close to the lives and interests of children. Instruction should provide clearly spoken English; simple instructions, descriptions and conversations; films, tales, songs and rhymes. Productive skills comprise simple presentations, descriptions, interactions and drama. By the time learners receive grades for the first time, in year 6, they are expected to have reached a proficiency level corresponding to A.2 in CEFR. Knowledge requirements in year 6, in relation to oral communication, involve basic understanding by accounting for and commenting on essential content; speaking and interacting in a simple and comprehensible way; the ability to use communicative strategies (Skolverket, 2018).

The policy documents do not mandate specific teaching materials, nor do they regulate target language use during lessons. Studies have found teachers’ use of the target language to vary dramatically in years K–3 in Swedish schools (Nilsson, 2013; Schröter et al., 2016). Furthermore, Schröter and Molander Danielsson (2016) noted a lack of authentic material in English, as well as TL communication among learners. Other studies have confirmed very differing amount of teachers’ use of English in primary school across Europe (Enever, 2011; Krulatz et al., 2016).
Most teachers in years 1–3 in Sweden are generalists, teaching all subjects. In years 4–6, English is taught by generalists or language teachers, depending on different ways of organizing teacher education. In current teacher education, all primary school student teachers need to attend courses in English and English teaching, 15 ECTS (European Credit Transfer system) credits for teachers in years K–3, and 30 credits for teachers in years 4–6.

3.4 Out-of-school English

Swedish everyday life offers plenty of incidental exposure to English. Signs and advertisement in English are a common feature, especially in urban areas. Via media, music and undubbed TV, children and adolescents have extensive opportunities to engage with English in their free time. A survey by the Swedish Media Council (Statens Medieråd, 2019b) reveals that 78% of Swedish children aged 9–12 report accessing internet on a daily basis, and 61% use internet for 2 hours or more per day. The threshold for “high consumption”, which was previously set at 3 hours per day, is no longer meaningful as it has now become normalized, illustrating the rapid development (Statens Medieråd, 2019b). In the age group 9–12, 79% play digital games (boys more than girls), and 59% interact on social media every day (more girls than boys). Digital technology has thus become part of daily life for primary school learners, and even younger children. How much of this interaction that involves English, and whether such activities involve both receptive and productive skills is uncertain, although Sundqvist and Sylvén (2014) found that most young gamers used English, rather than Swedish. Considering that almost half of the 2-year-olds and 85% of the 6-year-olds in Sweden use internet (Statens Medieråd, 2019a), it is not surprising that many Swedish children have plenty of knowledge of both elementary English vocabulary and grammar before the onset of English instruction (Håkansson, 2019). The importance of such on-line target language influx is difficult to overestimate, as it is likely to amount to many times more than the amount of

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1 The statistics presented are, notably, already a few years old as they were collected in 2018. However, so are the empirical data in studies I–III, collected 2015–2017. The previous survey (Statens medieråd, 2017) presents statistics concerning access to internet and the engagement with social media that are rather similar to those in the more recent study. Interestingly, there has been a decrease in the number of 9–12-year-olds who report playing digital games (from 87% in 2017 to 79% in 2019), and also in the difference according to gender in this regard.
English input from English lessons in school. Many children thus learn English on their own in their free time, which may explain why there is no market for out-of-school English instruction for primary learners in Sweden (Enever, 2018).

This abundance of English exposure and opportunities for interaction that are available for most children in Sweden makes the context different from other countries or regions where the teacher is the primary sources of TL input, as in some other contexts where a TL-only approach is mandated (Cadierno et al., 2020; Krulatz et al., 2016) and where the educational setting may constitute an “artificial foreign language learning environment” (Kym, 2004, p. 241). Hence, the conception of English as a foreign language in the Swedish context can be contested. Many have pointed out that the difference between English as a second language (L2) and English as a foreign language refers to the exposure in the educational setting as a whole (Ross, 2015). In reference to learners in mother tongue instruction in Sweden, multilingualism has been defined in terms of living in the presence of, and being able to use, languages other than Swedish in everyday life (Axelsson et al., 2005, p. 8). In the Swiss context, Lüdi and Py (2009, p. 158) defined multilingualism as the regular practice of several languages and the ability to switch between them to adapt to certain situations, without too much difficulty. According to such functional definitions, albeit from very different contexts, for many young citizens in Sweden who interact with English on a daily basis, English may very well be considered an second language, rather than a foreign language (Sylvén, 2019), or rather, the distinction is no longer meaningful (Sundqvist, 2020). Sylvén (2019) argues that in the Sweden

English should be considered a foreign language, simply because Swedish remains sufficient and adequate for anybody to function in most aspects of Swedish society – and also because of the overall competence in English, at all registers and levels of formality, is hardly sufficient for it to be considered a second language in the conventional sense of the term. (p. 6)

In sum, in the Swedish context, English is a foreign language, although it enjoys a particular status in the lives of many young citizens, especially in urban settings. Hence, as in many other contexts, the situation of YLLs in Sweden refers to the learning of English as a foreign language in school but also in informal settings in their free time (Sayer & Ban, 2019).

For the purpose of investigating FLA in young learners, the Swedish context presents an interesting case. First, due to the absence of grades and formal exams, that have been found to increase anxiety (Chan & Wu, 2004;
Liu & Chen, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). Second, because learners, although they may not actively engage with English in their free time, tend to be surrounded by English, in terms of popular culture and social media.

Chapters 2 and 3 have considered issues related to young learners and their context. The following chapter will move on to focus on previous research on YLLs and primary school English instruction.
4. Literature review

This chapter presents an overview of current trends and developments in research that are relevant to the current project, and reviews studies with YLLs in relation to FLA, learner beliefs and agency. The empirical studies that form part of the thesis contain more information on findings from adult learners, and although some of these will be relevant to the results in the respective studies, this chapter will focus on studies on young learners. The last sections of the chapter address contemporary research on the teaching of English in primary school.

4.1 FLA

FLA refers to “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning and using a second language” (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 3). Such negative emotions of unease and apprehension have attracted scholarly attention for several decades. The following section briefly discusses research approaches in the field and our current contextual understanding of FLA in general, before moving on to issues and studies related to FLA in young learners.

4.1.1 Research approaches

MacIntyre (2017) has outlined the trends in FLA research and mapped out three major approaches: the confounded, the specialized and the dynamic. In the 1970’s, which MacIntyre refers to as the confounded phase, the topic centered on language anxiety as a purely psychological construct and engaged scholars from a variety of disciplines. Scholars aimed to deconstruct and measure the phenomenon but studies produced rather inconclusive and conflicting results. Then in the 1980’s, with prominent researchers such as Horwitz, Gardner and MacIntyre, the field moved on to specialize on language anxiety in relation to foreign language instruction, regarding this as a situation-specific construct. Extensive research was conducted (for overviews, see Horwitz, 2010; MacIntyre, 2017), and quantitative instruments were
developed, of which the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986) is the one most widely used. Numerous studies attempted to uncover the underlying factors of FLA and whether FLA is the cause or the effect of poor performance. Advanced statistical analyses were conducted to determine the relationship between FLA and a range of individual variables, and how FLA interfered with the learning process in relation to different skills. With the more nuanced understanding of the importance of context and learner experiences, a new perspective has surfaced, referred to by MacIntyre (2017) as the dynamic approach. Contemporary research is thus devoting more attention to FLA as a fluctuating, contextual phenomenon related to personal factors but also to teaching and social dimensions in the classroom. Horwitz (2017) argues that rather than theorizing FLA, trying to uncover interactions between psychological individual constructs, research should take on a more applied focus and look for ways of developing teaching that counteracts negative emotion.

Research on FLA involving young participants has consisted mostly of quantitative studies conducted in Asia that have set out to measure levels of FLA and investigate correlations between FLA and a range of other variables, for example metacognition or gender (Chan & Wu, 2004; Kym, 2004; Liu & Chen, 2013, 2014; Yim, 2014; Yim & Yu, 2011). Although FLA is known to be situation-specific, many have presented their findings as generalizable beyond a specific context (e.g. Liu & Chen, 2013, 2014; Yim, 2014). The lack of such contextualized results makes it difficult to generalize findings (S. Kim, 2009) and for the reader to assess the importance of the studies and their relevance for other settings.

Furthermore, contextual differences at a range of different levels are likely to impact emotional responses such as FLA (S. Kim, 2009; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Horwitz (2016a) herself questioned the relevance of the FLCAS in sociocultural settings and populations beyond the American university context where it was first developed, assuming that triggers and manifestations of FLA may vary considerably across contexts. At a societal level, such differences may include norms related to behavioral and emotional expressions, as well as hierarchical aspects of the interaction between adults and children that have profound impact on the way learners interact and behave during lessons, and in their role as research participants. This may partly explain a number of inconclusive results in the body of studies on FLA, for instance related to gender (see e.g., Abu-Rabia, 2004; Aydin et al., 2017; Gürsoy & Akin, 2013).
Other contextual differences related to the educational system involve the grading system, the use of high-stakes testing, transitions between educational levels and the amount of governance in the syllabus. At a classroom level, variables comprise the class size, the activities, the routines and, above all, the teacher. In the case of young learners, these aspects may be especially influential, since their English lessons are most often their first experience of language instruction.

The linguistic proximity between learners’ L1 and the TL, and the alphabet used, are other variables to take into consideration. In addition, the status of English is an important factor that affects the learning situation both in and out of school, not only for learners but also their teachers. In fact, a substantial amount of research on young learners involve participants in second language environments, in other words, where the target language is the majority language of the community. Many findings stem from immersion settings, like CLIL (content and language integrated learning), where much of the school subjects are taught in English, or in bilingual environments (MacIntyre et al., 2002; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989, 1991b). In addition, bi- and multilingual learners of all ages appear less prone to FLA (Dewaele, 2007; Mihaljević Djigunović & Legac, 2009). Singleton and Pfenninger (2019) thus point out that results from such varying conditions must be considered with caution, and not overgeneralized.

As regards methodology, one limitation lies in the way that FLA has been operationalized. The FLCAS self-report questionnaires was developed for adult language students and includes 33 items. In young learners, FLA may need to be operationalized differently (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009), as both the content and the language items may be less relevant and appropriate for learners in primary school. Another important aspect is the challenge of translating emotionally loaded words in questionnaires like the FLCAS into other languages (Yim & Yu, 2011). Moreover, a phrase such as “speaking English in class” may refer to a range of situations, depending on educational context; it may imply talking while seated around a table or in a circle on a carpet with ten classmates and the teacher, or being called on in a much larger context with 50 peers where you feel constantly evaluated. Furthermore, there has not been a clear definition of what constitutes anxiety in the FLCAS and results can thus only be used to compare learners within a specific study (Csizér & Piniel, 2013).

Nevertheless, continuous research findings confirm the negative consequences of FLA for language learning (Daubney et al., 2017; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). The negative emotions consume cognitive resources as
learners focus on and cope with their affective state, and social exposure (MacIntyre et al., 2002). This has detrimental effects on the learning process as a whole, and interferes with retention, performance and acquisition (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Moreover, FLA is harmful for both physical, affective and social aspects of classroom experiences (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). As FLA impairs learners’ focus on task, their strategy use and ability to work independently, they become more reliant on their teacher (Pekrun, 2014). FLA is thought to develop from repeated negative classroom experiences that generate a vicious cycle, as learners start to associate language learning situations with negative emotion (MacIntyre et al., 2002; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b). This situation-specific anxiety is thus both a cause and an effect of poor performance (MacIntyre, 2017). Some have maintained that moderate levels of FLA can be beneficial, at least in adult learners, as it keeps them alert (e.g., Lu & Liu, 2011). Horwitz opposes such claims, referring to this idea as “truly disturbing” (2016b, p. 934) and a “dangerous trend” (2017, p. 39).

4.1.2 FLA in young learners
Considering young learners, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991a, 1991b) claimed that the concept of FLA was not relevant. While the challenge of self-expression in a new language was thought to be more frustrating for adult learners, children were assumed not to associate discomfort with the language learning situation. However, later studies confirmed the prevalence of FLA in young learners, its negative impact on self-concept and the detrimental long-term effects also in the case of young learners (MacIntyre et al., 2002; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009; Waddington, 2019; Yim & Yu, 2011). The assumption that primary school children are less prone to FLA is, however, still common (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009; Waddington, 2019).

For reasons related to operationalization and measurements, it is difficult to compare measures and levels of anxiety. Liu and Chen (2013) concluded that all items included in their questionnaire, an adapted version of the FLCAS, generated responses indicative of moderate or high-anxiety levels in at least 50% of their sample, presumably aged 10–12. Studies from varying contexts (Er, 2015; Gürsoy & Akin, 2013; Kym, 2004; Lundberg, 2007; Mihaljević Djigunović & Legac, 2009) suggest a general increase of FLA by the age 10 or 11, when many learners become increasingly self-aware and able to assess their performance in relation to their peers (Liu & Chen, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009). Studies have
found these negative emotions to peak during teenage years (Er, 2015; MacIntyre & Devaele, 2014). Mihaljević Djigunović (2009) found FLA in primary school children to increase during the first years of language study, along with proficiency, hence concluding that FLA does not appear related to actual proficiency, as originally suggested by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994). It has, however, been found to be correlated to low perceived proficiency (Liu & Chen, 2013; Tsipakides & Keramida, 2009). In a contextual perspective, it is possible that taken together, the maturing self-awareness and the increasing heterogeneity of proficiency in the classroom as learners progress, explain the aggravated FLA. Such heterogeneous classrooms have been found to increase these negative emotions in adult learners (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005) and thus underscores the situated nature of FLA. Similarly, in a context where learners’ experience of English instruction ranges between 2 and 7 years or more, due to out-of-school tuition, as in the studies in school years 5 and 6 by Liu and Chen (2013, 2014), it is not surprising that some learners feel anxious. Under different circumstances, in a classroom with less proficient peers, many learners’ FLA might be alleviated considerably.

Similar to findings from adults, FLA in young learners has been found to be related to, for instance, strategy use (Liu & Chen, 2014), “incorrect” learner beliefs (Liu & Chen, 2013, p. 936) and self-confidence (Yim & Yu, 2011). As pointed out by Liu and Chen (2013), FLA may in turn impact these same variables, which makes it impossible to draw any clear causal conclusions.

Moving on to classroom practices and situations that trigger FLA, researchers have found a range of fears and aggravating conditions. Chan and Wu (2004) concluded that incomprehensible input ignited FLA in young learners and that a more balanced TL and L1 use could reduce FLA. Similarly, Macaro and Lee (2013) found YLLs to be less tolerant to incomprehensible input than older learners and that interaction and learner engagement decreased with increased TL use on part of the teacher. Common classroom triggers of FLA involve speaking in class and being called on (Chan & Wu, 2004; Liu & Chen, 2013, 2014), as well as reactions from peers (Kym, 2004; Skinnari, 2014; Tsipakides & Keramida, 2009). Other fears relate to making mistakes (Gürsoy & Akin, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009; Skinnari, 2014), negative evaluations (Chan & Wu, 2004), tests and exams (Chan & Wu, 2004; Gürsoy & Akin, 2013) and fear of failing the course or falling behind (Liu & Chen, 2013, 2014) as well as parental pressure (Chan & Wu, 2004). Summarizing these findings, children across contexts report speaking in class and making mistakes to evoke FLA, similar to the experiences of adult learners (e.g., Gkonou, 2014, 2017). Many researchers point to the paramount
importance of the teachers, especially in the case of young learners, as their emotional warmth and the atmosphere they help establish in the classroom strongly impact young learners’ attitudes and emotions (Abu-Rabia, 2004; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009, 2015; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009).

Studies on young learners in the Swedish context are limited, and no studies have focused specifically on FLA in YLLs. In an action research study Lundberg (2007) involved primary teachers who reported that learners aged 9–10 were more reluctant to speak English than younger learners. The teachers brought up the challenge of teaching mixed ability groups and maintaining motivation among both the most and the least proficient learners. Sundqvist and Sylvén (2014) focused on gaming among young learners and concluded speaking anxiety to be low among 10–11-year-olds, and that the gamers were less anxious about making mistakes than their peers. Thompson and Sylvén (2015) investigated FLA in CLIL and non-CLIL students at upper secondary school in Sweden and found levels of FLA to be significantly lower among CLIL students, and among boys. The authors highlight that students opting to enroll in CLIL are likely to have been less prone to experiencing FLA to begin with. Large TL exposure within a CLIL setup may thus not be the factor that reduces FLA.

Few interventions studies, that attempt to reduce or counteract FLA have been conducted. Tsiplikiades and Keramida (2009) carried out one such study with Greek 13–14-year-olds and managed to mitigate FLA and increase willingness to interact over one semester. This was done by increasing group work, negotiating classroom rules (such as not making fun of mistakes) and implementing a range of measures aiming to improve the atmosphere and have students focus more on interaction than accuracy. Further positive findings were that learners resorted less to their L1 and increased their fluency. The authors point out, however, that not all of the teenage learners showed such improvement, which underscores the importance of taking the needs of individual learners into account.

A number of practical implications can thus be concluded from studies mentioned so far. To begin with, it is important for teachers to be aware of the prevalence of FLA in young learners (Chan & Wu, 2004; Liu & Chen, 2013; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015). In their mixed methods study involving interviews with nine teachers, Chan and Wu (2004) found that many of them were unaware of the negative emotions that their young learners reported.

Moreover, as with adult learners, teachers are encouraged to discuss emotional aspects of learning in their classrooms, and address situations where learners may feel exposed or challenged (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009;
Waddington, 2019). Furthermore, teachers should encourage positive self-assessment (Yim, 2014) and teach strategies that help learners deal with target language input (Liu & Chen, 2014). Macaro and Lee (2013) urge teachers to conduct such discussions and reflections related to language learning and instruction in the L1. Overall, an important consideration is the balance of TL and L1 language use during lessons (Chan & Wu, 2004; Macaro & Lee, 2013). Conversely however, based on the finding that learners who had studied abroad had lower levels of FLA, Yim (2014) concluded that a TL-only approach should be implemented in English classrooms, to maximize input. However, increasing exposure through traveling abroad or interaction via online media is arguable rather different from coping with the TL in the foreign language classroom, where the teacher offers procedural instructions and assesses the accomplishments of each learner. Considering the findings reviewed so far, formal TL instruction and assessment without L1 support may instead increase FLA in YLLs.

A dynamic approach to language education research in general and a contextual understanding of concepts such as FLA call for new research methods and foci (Daubney et al., 2017; MacIntyre, 2017). Rather than measuring levels and attempting to uncover complex causation, attention is shifting towards understanding learning in context, considering the perspective of learners. In a recent article, Horwitz (2017) argues for advancing our knowledge and understanding of the experiences of individuals and demographic groups of learners, in order to steer research in a more applied direction, that is, to look for ways of developing teaching that counteract negative emotion. Mihaljević Djigunović (2012) adds that case studies involving young learners in their natural setting may contribute greatly to our understanding of the complexity involved in teaching them. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 will thus bring us closer to the voices of learners themselves, focusing on studies that have foregrounded beliefs and sense of agency among YLLs.

4.2 YLLs’ perspectives and experiences

While FLA is a rather well-defined concept, delimitating the area of learner beliefs is more challenging as it often overlaps with other elusive concepts, for instance, attitudes, conceptions, perceptions and awareness. This conceptual plenitude presents a challenge in accessing relevant literature and also in limiting the scope of a literature review such as this one. Studies
revolving around learners’ beliefs and experiences, in other words, learners’ thoughts and assumptions about language learning, as well as their actual perceptions about English instruction in general, are included in this literature review, whereas self-efficacy beliefs, that is, beliefs about the ability to perform a specific task, or broader psychological concepts, like mindset, are not.

4.2.1 Research approaches in studies on language learner beliefs
Research on learner beliefs have developed in ways similar to that in in the field of FLA, towards a more dynamic and situated understanding of the phenomenon. Barcelos (2003) describes three perspectives that have guided research into learner beliefs: the normative, the metacognitive and the contextual. Studies took off in the 1980’s, when Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988) suggested that students’ behavior and affective responses may be related to learner beliefs. Quantitative self-report measurements were used to describe and classify learners’ beliefs, which were regarded as rather stable mental constructions that were either productive or erroneous. Data could thus be gathered without much consideration to context. Other studies were conducted in line with a metacognitive perspective (e.g., Wenden, 1986, 1999). These were more qualitative in nature, where learners were interviewed about their beliefs related to language learning, as these beliefs were thought to guide learning and be strongly connected to the autonomous learning behavior that instruction aimed at. Since the 1990’s, in line with a more sociocultural understanding, a contextual approach has emerged. It comprises studies using a range of theoretical perspectives but which all consider learner beliefs to be dynamic, contextual and social (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Kalaja et al., 2016, 2018). Such understanding opens up for a variety of methodological approaches emphasizing the way in which beliefs develop and which aim to interpret learner beliefs as embedded in the natural context of learning.

Considering YLLs’ emergent metacognitive development and their limited experience of language instruction, it is logical that their primary school English teacher, and the teaching approach, exert a strong influence on their learner beliefs (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). Hence, as with FLA, a closer consideration of the educational context is central in order to make sense of findings related to beliefs in primary English classrooms.
4.2.2 YLLs’ beliefs

Research on young learners’ beliefs and experiences is limited, although scholars have stressed the importance of the teacher and early language instruction on attitudes and motivation later on in life (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). In 2001, Nikolov used a retrospective approach to access such experiences, focusing on Hungarian adults that considered themselves “unsuccessful learners”, asking them to look back on their initial English education at ages 6–9. She concluded that early classroom practices are key factors for motivation and self-perception later on in life. In relation to FLA, many of the participants mentioned fear of making mistakes, reactions from peers and feelings of anxiety in relation to oral tests.

Yet, with the growing interest in the perspective of the young learners themselves, the number of studies involving children is steadily increasing (Garton & Copland, 2019). In Germany, Kolb (2007) conducted a study with language learners aged 8–9 and found that they expressed rather elaborate beliefs that impacted their approach to learning. These conceptions about language instruction, focusing more on imitating, memorizing and reproducing words and phrases or learning in a more holistic manner, by communicating and interacting in the TL, resemble the various conceptions held by adults. Psaltou-Joycey and Sougari (2010) found that Greek learners in year 6 held strong beliefs about the role of the teacher. The learners called for opportunities for oral practice and foregrounded the importance of the ways in which they received feedback. Some believed it was important to have grammatical structures presented beforehand, to improve accuracy, whereas others believed that speaking was more important than accuracy. In Spain, Muñoz (2014) found support for the emergent and contextual nature of beliefs in young bilingual learners, aged 7–12, as they accounted for their preferences and experiences of learning English. Moreover, they were able to separate between activities that they enjoyed and those that they felt were more beneficial to learning. These learners stated that they learned more from listening than from speaking, and expressed a strong preference for activities related to vocabulary. Using a focus group approach to investigate experiences among YLLs in Kamerun, Kuchah and Pinter (2012) revealed that their participants, aged 10–11, did in fact express beliefs about what constituted good teaching that to some extent challenged the views of their teachers. Moreover, the study underscored the paramount emotional and relational components in their beliefs and experiences of language learning.

From a sociocultural perspective it is central to be aware of the influence of societal adult discourses on the way children see themselves and interpret
their experiences (Alderson et al., 2005). Several Finnish studies related to learners’ beliefs and awareness have focused on how these develop. Drawing on the Bakhtinian concept of voice, Dufva (2003) found that children’s voices reproduced school discourses on language learning. Aro (2009) conducted a phenomenographic study on learners aged 7–12, revealing how their beliefs were both individual and shared, appropriated from parents and teachers. The influence of the teacher also extended beyond the explicit classroom discourse, as learners inferred values and beliefs from the way the teacher conducted lessons and recurrently implemented certain activities and routines (Dufva & Aro, 2015). The echoes of significant others in young learners’ expressed attitudes and beliefs find support in Mihaljević Djigunović and Letica Krevelj (2010), focusing on Croatian learners.

Later on, however, Mihaljević Djigunović (2015) concluded that the influence of teachers and parents may have been exaggerated and that with increasing age and experience, learners soon develop their beliefs based on these subjective experiences. Along the same line, several European studies have found that attitudes and motivation are influenced by teachers and parents during the initial language instruction, but decrease throughout primary school (Fenyvesi, 2018; Muñoz, 2014).

Nevertheless, the teacher and the teaching itself, which make up the learners’ experiences, strongly influence learner beliefs, and agency, as revealed by Dufva and Aro (2015). Overall, YLLs appear to favor familiar, scaffolded activities in orderly classrooms (Mihaljević Djigunović & Krevelj, 2009; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015; Muñoz, 2014). Turányi (2009) found that learners in year 1, asked how they themselves would teach vocabulary, reproduced beliefs and approaches related to their own experience. Muñoz (2014) came to the same conclusion, as learners brought up different experiences, related to teaching or classroom management that differed across their respective classrooms, which appeared to have direct effect on their beliefs. These findings thus clearly illustrate the close interaction between beliefs and experiences.

Since learners’ beliefs and attitudes affect their behavior and engagement, teachers are encouraged to show an interest in and discuss language learner beliefs in their primary English classrooms (Kolb, 2007). As described by Riley (1997), “what they believe will influence their learning much, much more than what we believe, because it is their beliefs that hold sway over their motivations, attitudes and learning procedures” (p. 128).

On a methodological note, the findings stress the importance of aiming to reduce the power imbalance in research with children. Alän (2003) has
pointed out the challenges of interviewing young learners, with questions that are sometimes leading and where learners may adjust answers to what they believe to be expected by the researcher. Moreover, Kuchah and Pinter (2012) stress that if YLLs’ perspectives are to be taken seriously, methodological designs need to empower and allow them to express not only what their beliefs are in relation to the interest of the researcher, but rather what is important to them. Such accounts may include perspectives that surpass those expected by the researchers (Kuchah & Pinter, 2012).

4.3 Young learner agency
FLA and language learner beliefs are, by definition, concepts related to language instruction, whereas agency is a phenomenon that is relevant to all school subjects. Introduced in the field of anthropology, Ahearn conceptualized agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (2001, p. 112). The term has since been adopted by numerous fields of research, where it is operationalized and theorized in a variety of ways. Within applied linguistics and language education, agency has gained scholarly attention during the last decade (along with concepts such as identity and self), reflecting a growing interest in learners as individuals (Benson, 2019), and many have studied agency in adults from a variety of perspectives (Gao, 2010; Gkonou, 2015; Mercer, 2011b; van Lier, 2008, 2013).

Sairanen and Kumpulainen (2014, p. 145) describe agency in young learners as a sense of feeling able to, knowing how to, and being allowed to do something that they want to or have to do, as well as the emotions and experiences involved. Put differently, the development of agency hinges on social interaction with the surrounding context, which needs to be warm and supportive in order for children to develop a positive perception of their own capabilities (Kumpulainen et al., 2014; Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014). Agency is thus situated and embodied (Aro, 2016b). There is consensus as to the paramount importance of fostering young learners’ sense of agency, for language learning but also as a goal of primary education in itself (Kumpulainen et al., 2014; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016; Pinter, 2019; Rixon, 2019). More specifically, agency in children has been found to correlate with more effective use of learning strategies, independence and resilience (Alper & McGregor, 2015).

Studies with YLLs are, again, scarce. A longitudinal project by Aro (2009, 2016b) found that with increasing experience, language learners develop their
own agency, to differing degrees. The feedback and the responses that learners received on their initiatives and their performance were crucial for the development of agency. Classrooms where the teaching approach matched the beliefs and preferences of the learners, had positive effects on this emergent agency. Pinter (2019) has found task repetition to be one way of consolidating learner agency (as will be discussed further in Section 4.4.1). Sayer and Ban (2019) point out that the increasing presence of digital technology in the daily lives of YLLs are rapidly contributing to learners’ sense of agency and control in relation to interacting in English. Alper and McGregor (2015) underscore that successful interaction reinforces a sense of agency. The situated nature of agency also implies, according to these scholars, that classrooms should be designed to be supportive and offer engaging material, scaffolding and plenty of opportunities to interact.

As regards methodology, a multifaceted notion such as agency cannot easily be operationalized, but must instead be inferred. Aro (2009) analyzed content in learners’ interview responses, but also conducted a word level analysis, focusing on sentence subjects (for instance whether learners used the pronouns I, you or we during interviews). Studies have also focused on agentic behavior, observing the way YLLs engage and perform as they work with certain tasks (as in Pinter, 2019). However, Skinnari (2014), who used a mixed methods approach with Finnish CLIL students aged 11–13, points out that at least in the case of young learners and the complex classroom interaction they are involved in, agency cannot be concluded from observations. For example, choosing to be silent in class may or may not be a way of executing agency (although not in line with the educational intentions). Hence, the author argues that investigations of agency cannot rely solely on observations, but need to be grounded in the perspectives of YLLs themselves (Skinnari, 2014). Moreover, as a sense of agency, like beliefs, take shape in interaction and in a specific context, the influence of a researcher in interviews or observations must be acknowledged (Alper & McGregor, 2015). Duran (2015) adds that adult researchers need to be aware of their own presumptions about the rationales and emotions of young learners and pay close attention to such bias in their explorations of children’s agency. Investigating agency and the perspectives of YLLs, it is crucial to be mindful of the possible impact of the generation gap between the researcher and the children, in the processes of collecting and analyzing data.
4.4 Current trends in research in early English instruction

The following sections will offer an overview of trends in research on early English instruction, in relation to two salient topics that are closely connected to CLT, namely TBLT and TL use in the classroom. After a brief introduction of CLT, these two topics will be discussed, in relation to YLLs. Furthermore, studies are reviewed that define qualitative teaching in primary school and that reveal aspects of EYL that have been found challenging for teachers.

CLT is an umbrella term with many interpretations (Littlewood, 2013). It was introduced in the 1970’s and has since had tremendous impact on language teaching and been widely adopted. CLT highlights the functional use of language that should be the goal of instruction. To achieve this aim, teaching should be designed to engage learners with authentic materials and tasks that push learners to express themselves, interact and negotiate meaning. According to Rixon (2019), CLT was mainly developed with the teaching of adults in the context of private language schools in mind. The author goes on to argue that “if the term has any meaning for the teaching of children, it might serve best to express a general aspiration to make the language learning process meaningful to the learners” (p. 7). Although songs, rhymes, wordplay and repetitive tasks may not be very communicative, they are nevertheless appropriate for children and part of young learners’ meaning-making. Such activities create ZPDs and lay the foundation for more communicative competence ahead (Cummins, 2001). CLT may thus need to be reframed in the case of young learners. In recent years, scholars in the field of EYL have stressed the importance of critical reflection and consideration when teaching YLLs using approaches that were developed for adults (Copland & Ni, 2019; Dalle & Kleckova, 2018; Enever, 2018). Furthermore, given the technological development that is rapidly changing children’s out-of-school exposure to English and their opportunities to engage with the TL, Ohashi (2015) raises the relevant questions of what key words such as meaningful, functional and authentic mean in the lives of young learners.

4.4.1 TBLT

According to R. Ellis (2009), activities within the TBLT approach are meaning-focused, involve an information gap, require the use of both linguistic and non-linguistic strategies and have a clear goal. The possible benefits of task-based learning in EYL have been considered in recent years. R. Ellis (2020) opposes the idea that TBLT would not be suitable for young beginners because it requires basic communicative skills in the TL, and
proposes carefully designed, teacher-led and input-based activities for beginner learners. However, studies also find that TBLT where YLLs themselves need to communicate and interact may be beneficial, to make the most of children’s meaning-focused approach to language and the way they learn from repetition and play. For example, Shintani (e.g., 2014) illustrated how Japanese 6-year-old beginners were happy to engage with the same teacher-led, input-based activity on nine occasions and would increasingly spontaneously repeat words out-loud after the teacher, negotiate meaning and ask questions in the TL. Although the activity did not require oral production, the amount and range of English increased significantly among these YLLs. The activity demanded clear preparation and guidance by the teacher but the demand for scaffolding decreased with each cycle. The study illustrates a sociocultural learning process, where children focus on language as a tool rather than an object, and engage in language play. Shintani (2014) therefore proposes making repetitive use of such tasks, allowing learners to familiarize themselves with the activity, which in turn generates less need for procedural instructions in the L1.

With slightly older learners, setting out to investigate the role of repetition in task-based information-gap pair work, Pinter (2007) conducted a study with 10-year-old Hungarian students. In a similar study Azkarai and García Mayo (2017) focused on 9–10-year-old Spanish learners of English. Both studies found that task repetition, with the identical or similar task, significantly reduced L1 use among learners and increased engagement. Pinter also concluded linguistic gains, such as increased TL fluency as well as accuracy. Consequently, she argues, teachers should make more use of TBLT and repetition of familiar tasks to provide YLLs with scaffolded meaning-focused activities and plenty of opportunities to practice, that fosters agency and places teaching within the ZPD (Pinter, 2019).

Another TBLT approach that has proven fruitful for young learners is role-play, where learners can benefit from repetition as they develop short scenes or interaction. In Germany, Becker and Roos (2016) investigated 8–11-year-old learners engaged in role-play and showed the positive effects of designing activities to empower YLLs to progress from reproduction, to more creative TL use and finally, reach a stage where they are able to interact with increased proficiency, confidence and TL fluency.

Yet another resource to use in connection to TBLT is new digital technology, that opens up for new possibilities to develop learning situations, both in and out of school. In a study with Dutch-speaking children aged 10–12 who had not yet begun studying English, De Wilde et al. (2019) found that
the out-of-school exposure with the largest effect on primary learners’ English proficiency, were gaming, social media and speaking. In line with sociocultural theory of children’s learning, digital games allow learners to choose and control their actions, develop strategies to deal with challenges and incomprehensible input, and offer plenty of repetition, focus on meaning, regular feedback and a clear goal. Therefore, the development of online classroom tasks that are meaning-focused, learner-focused and that feel authentic should be considered (Pinter, 2019). Most importantly though, with or without the use of digital technology, formal language instruction should aspire for interaction and meaningful communication (De Wilde et al., 2019).

In sum, a variety of meaning-focused and TBLT-inspired activities, can be designed to suit YLLs and develop their communicative skills, and, as described by Csizér and Kálmán (2019), “slowly shift language learning experiences into language use experiences” (p. 241), which is the goal of instruction.

4.4.2 Target language use

The last decade has witnessed an intensifying debate about language use in the foreign language classroom. The idea of CLT, as introduced during the 70’s, brought with it the aim of native-like language proficiency and monolingual language teaching where both the context and the L1 could be neglected (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Littlewood, 2013). In more recent years, the TL-only approach has been questioned, and studies on the issue have also involved YLLs.

To begin with, Macaro and Lee (2013) concluded that a TL approach increases FLA in beginner learners, especially those below adult age. Thus, a TL-only ideal, aiming to foster increased communicative competence in learners, may, ironically, reduce classroom communication, as it presents an obstacle for learners to interact. Littlewood and Yu (2011) pointed out that explanations and procedural instructions are often delivered in language that is more advanced than that which the actual activity entails, which is quite often the case with young learners. Furthermore, L1 support may promote the non-threatening environment that is essential in early language instruction (Chan & Wu, 2004; Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Liu & Chen, 2013, 2014). Allowing for some L1 use helps children, who have limited language proficiency, to feel heard and safe, and thus has a social and relational function (Copland & Ni, 2019). Studies have revealed that the use of L1 as teaching
tool increases learners’ focus and engagement (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2014).

Moreover, some use of the L1 does not only meet social and affective needs of children but offers learners the opportunity to draw on their L1 competence as a cognitive resource. An experimental study with pre-primary learners, aged 5–6, Song and Lee (2019) found that an activity involving storytelling resulted in better retention both in the short and the long term, when some L1 was included to facilitate comprehension, than with the same activity conducted solely in the TL. Balanced L1 support thus involves linguistic gains. Another empirical study, involving native and non-native speaking English teachers in Japanese primary schools, concluded that L1 is a pedagogical tool that teachers can make strategic use of and that bilingual English instruction should be favored when possible (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016). According to Song and Lee (2019) an overwhelming majority of young beginner learners favor support in the L1.

The problem of applying a target language approach and the potential benefits of allowing primary teachers to include some L1, to some extent, has been reiterated by a number of scholars (Cameron, 2001; Copland & Ni, 2019; Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Littlewood & Yu, 2011; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2019). The L1 can thus be seen as an instructional tool to counteract frustration and let learners make use of and build on their knowledge in the L1. To do so, teachers who are proficient in the learners’ L1 are at a pedagogical advantage (Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016; Song & Lee, 2019). Mihaljevic Djigunović (2012) points out that the crucial question is not how much, but for what purpose the L1 is used. Similarly, Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2014) suggest optimal rather than exclusive TL use.

Focusing on the situation in the Nordic countries, Krulatz et al. (2016), found very varying amounts of TL use across primary classrooms in Norway, and that these teachers of EYL used less English than teachers in educational contexts that mandate monolingual teaching. Swedish studies are scarce. In a limited exploratory initial study, for a project that was unfortunately never pursued, Schröter and Molander Danielsson (2016) used questionnaires, interviews and observations to investigate English teaching in Swedish primary classrooms. Their findings were similar, with Swedish dominating English instruction, a lot of self-translation and a lack of meaningful and engaging activities. The authors of these studies consider the possibility that teachers themselves are not proficient or confident TL users to be good role models for their learners, directing attention to language teacher education.
found in (Nilsson, 2013) some teachers in the Swedish context justified the use of the L1 to reduce anxiety.

4.4.3 Quality and challenges in EYL
Mihaljević Djigunović (2012, 2017) argues that rather than regarding motivation as a precondition for successful language learning, instilling and maintaining such motivation should be considered the goal of early language instruction. This view aligns well line with the Swedish curricular goals, as with many national policy documents elsewhere (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2012). In the ELLiE project, that investigated language teaching in primary school across Europe, Tragant Mestre and Lundberg (2011) summarized a number of salient factors of high quality teaching: that teachers are themselves positive to the TL and to teaching it at an early age, that they manage to create a positive and supportive atmosphere, plan their lessons well, share their objectives with learners, use the TL to offer rich and varied input, and facilitate interaction and communication. Many researchers in the field of EYL agree that quality in primary language education involves creating positive experiences of language instruction, nurture an emergent sense of agency and reduce FLA (Copland & Ni, 2019; Enever, 2018; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016).

Described in other words, Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2014) argue that optimal conditions for EYL instruction involves supportive, scaffolded teaching, with clear instructions in a supportive, orderly and warm classroom environment. These claims find support in Hamre et al. (2013), who conducted an extensive study to investigate components or dimensions related to quality in the teaching of primary learners. Three qualitative dimensions were concluded: an emotional, an organizational and an instructional. High quality language instruction according to these findings would thus offer 1) a warm and supportive atmosphere that focuses on maintaining motivation and counteracting FLA, 2) orderly and well-organized lessons with opportunities for input as well as output, and 3) scaffolded and meaning-focused activities with plenty of re-cycling (Rixon, 2019) that engage learners.

However, in a global survey study with thousands of primary school English teachers around the world, Copland, Garton and Burns (2014) revealed that two major challenges underscored by these teachers were to make their learners communicate in the TL and to teach mixed-proficiency classrooms. In addition, we know that heterogeneous proficiency levels may cause both frustration and boredom in learners (Pfenninger & Singleton,
2019). In relation to the issue of introducing English from the onset of primary education, Nikolov (2016) underscores that “it is now widely acknowledged and documented that maintaining young learners’ motivation over many years is an unexpected challenge emerging in most contexts: the earlier L2 learning is introduced, the sooner typical classroom activities and topics become boring for young learners” (p. 4). Cadierno et al. (2020) raise similar concerns in their recent study that investigated Danish children that were introduced to English instruction either at the age of 7, or 9. Findings revealed that the older learners knew more English from the onset (echoing findings by Håkansson, 2019), and outperformed the younger learners on proficiency tests after a few years of instruction. The researchers highlight that it may in fact be easier to design meaningful activities for slightly more mature learners, as teaching can build on the extensive out-of-school exposure in the Nordic countries, that possibly explains their higher proficiency from the very onset. Arguably, however, as not all learners engage with out-of-school English to the same extent, a later onset may further increase heterogeneity in language proficiency from the start. In any case, mixed-proficiency classrooms present a challenge for teachers but also for learners, and may generate either FLA or boredom. Therefore, more research is needed that increases our understanding of the perspectives of the learners and how their attitudes and emotions interact with TL learning (Nikolov, 2016).

4.5 Summary

Drawing on the developments, trends and results accounted for in this review, in relation to the perceptions of young learners but also English instruction, it is possible to discern an increasing awareness of the necessity to look at learning and teaching in a contextualized manner. Considering the foregrounded impact of affective variables, and the framing of motivation and agency as the goal of EYL, researchers are calling for more studies that focus on the perspectives of learners themselves (Kuchah & Pinter, 2012; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015). Studies where YLLs share their experiences may contribute with important insight into the way learners perceive, make sense of, and react to their learning environment and how personal, contextual and social dimensions interact. Even more importantly, the development of foreign language pedagogy should be informed not only by tests and observations of young learners, but also on the perceptions and experiences of these learners themselves. To my knowledge, no study investigating the
relationship between FLA, beliefs and agency, and their embeddedness in an instructional context, has been conducted with YLLs. The studies conducted in this project address this gap. The next chapter deals with the theoretical assumptions and conceptual understanding that frames the project.
5. Theoretical framework

This chapter introduces the theoretical perspectives that serve as backdrop to the thesis as a whole and that contribute to our understanding of the interaction between cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions that are involved in the processes of classroom interaction. The thesis draws on sociocultural, sociocognitive and dialogic perspectives in ways which will be accounted for in this chapter. These three approaches complement each other and their different foci help enrich and nuance our understanding of social and individual dimensions of learning, interaction and meaning-making.

The following sections will review the theoretical perspectives to arrive at positions that inform the current thesis. Then, concepts relevant for the three studies are discussed, namely FLA, learner beliefs, and sense of agency (following the order in which they appear in the studies). Subsequently, two additional Vygotskyan concepts, perezhivanie and the ZPD, will be addressed, as they have bearing on the project as a whole. Interestingly, perezhivanie will underscore the holistic nature of Vygotsky’s writing, that considers the social, cognitive and also emotional dimensions of human development, which some have pointed out as missing in sociocultural theory. The final section summarizes the theoretical underpinnings of the thesis.

5.1 Sociocultural, sociocognitive and dialogical perspectives

Based on the writings of Vygotsky, many strands of sociocultural theory have emerged within the field of applied linguistics, that foreground the crucial role of socioculturally embedded interaction and communication on our thoughts, our learning, and our identity. Some argue that there has been an overemphasis on social dimensions of learning, resulting in a neglect of consideration for the individual learner (Kalaja et al., 2016; Linell, 2009; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004).

During the last decades, more holistic approaches have developed to bridge the divide between the cognitive and the sociocultural paradigms, while also

5.1.1 Learning in social interaction
Sociocultural theory holds mental development as stemming from social interaction (Lantolf, 2011). Vygotsky viewed such development as a process where humans learn to regulate and control their cognitive and communicative activities. Interaction between the cognitive mind and the surrounding world is mediated, and language is the primary tool that helps reshape knowledge. For children, imitation and play are central to learning, as they appropriate language to develop their inner speech. Input from the external and social context is thus appropriated and integrated to the inner cognition as a process of internalization. The social environment is, therefore, not only the context, but the origin of learning (Swain & Deters, 2007).

The sociocognitive perspective offers a slightly different take. While supporting the role of social interaction and language as key for learning, Atkinson (2010, 2011, 2019) proposes a broadened perception of learning by stressing that it is also embodied and experiential; biological and emotional processes as well as physical motion and activities impact learning. The development of cognition is ongoing and fundamentally integrated with the sociocultural world. Therefore, Atkinson (2010) prefers the term engagement to internalization, to underscore that this process is not unidirectional and finite. Whereas the sociocultural perspective frames the purpose of mental development in terms of self-regulation and behavioral control, Atkinson (2011, 2014) advances this argument by stating that the final purpose is for the individual to adapt to, and align with the surrounding context; all individuals learn in order to keep safe, attune to the social world, maintain relationships and pursue personal agendas. Learning is understood as an ongoing and unavoidable drive, either conscious or unconscious, and a default mode of human existence (Atkinson, 2014). Thus, the learning of a second language involves the strive to adapt to new social practices.

From a dialogic viewpoint, Matusov (2011) has also challenged the notion of internalization, pointing out that it conveys a monologic view of language
and interaction, where knowledge is regarded as information transfer. In contrast, rooted in the dialogic nature of human interaction (discussed further in Section 5.1.3 below), learning is seen as a process where both the learner and the instructor contribute and negotiate understanding (Matusov, 2011).

It thus appears that sociocognitive and dialogic perspectives provide a more agentic conceptualization of the learner. However, Lantolf and Thorne (2007), claim that the idea of appropriation and internalization as a transfer is a misconception of sociocultural theory. Learning can never be understood as hinging on social factors alone and that it is also a creative, individual and cognitive process on part of the learner. In the context of the current thesis, these differences are not believed to be mutually exclusive, nor essential. Crucial, however, is the idea that learners are active agents and that teaching and learning are ongoing social events, involving mental but also embodied and emotional aspects, where both parties contribute, engage and negotiate in interactions.

5.1.2 The individual learner

Lantolf and Thorne (2006) stress that although Vygotskyan theory is called “sociocultural”, the focal point is not on the social nor the cultural aspects of cognitive processes, but a “theory of mind” (Lantolf, 2004, pp. 30–31) that studies human cognition without ignoring the social context. Similarly, Vitanova et al. (2015) claim that sociocultural theory focuses on the interaction between the individual and the social communities on the one hand, and cognition and experience on the other. Dufva (2013) points out that Vygotsky did not make any distinction between the social and the cognitive, or the external and the internal, but instead underscored the close interaction between such dimensions, rejecting dualist distinctions. In his writing, Vygotsky focused mostly on individuals, although without elaborating on environmental conditions.

2 Notably, the sociocultural claim that language and cognition is socioculturally mediated also has consequences for theorizing. Some of what Lantolf and Thorne (2007) refer to as misunderstandings of sociocultural theory may have to do with the fact that Vygotsky’s writing has been translated, read and interpreted after his death and in very different sociocultural and sociopolitical settings, or what Daniels (2001) refers to as “selective and partial reading” (pp. 9–13) in Western countries. In other words, ironically, Vygotsky’s ideas may not have been considered in relation to his own sociocultural context. Furthermore, as discussed in Section 5.2.1, sociocultural concepts related to human cognition and emotion are often challenging to translate into other languages.
Nonetheless, many have argued that studies grounded in sociocultural approaches have taken on macro perspectives and focused on groups, structures and social systems, and that such studies become somewhat instrumental and lose sight of the individual learner (Kalaja et al., 2016; Linell, 2009; Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004). Daniels (2001) asserts that fixating on interpersonal dimensions obstructs the development of a deeper understanding of individual learners and the variety of needs and actions within the same sociocultural setting. Likewise, Pavlenko (2013) points out that this social focus has failed to address the diversity of responses and emotions in any group of learners. In the context of the present thesis, such considerations are crucial. A view of individuals in their context, is therefore necessary.

While sociocultural theory acknowledges both the cognitive and the social dimensions of human development, the sociocognitive-informed perspective focuses more on the individual, while also tying the two dimensions even closer together to arrive at a more integrated understanding. A key claim is that mental activities are inextricably and inseparably connected to other aspects of our existence; as the brain comprehends, stores, retrieves and processes information, and anticipates and plans, it does so in constant reciprocal interaction with neurological, emotional and physical aspects (for an overview of studies, see Atkinson, 2010; further supported in recent neuroscience, see Atkinson, 2019). For instance, children’s learning is affected by their physical actions and bodily experiences. Another example of embodied cognition is the way in which speech is most often accompanied by gestures and other kinds of non-verbal communication. A sociocognitive perspective thus foregrounds the impact of social and bodily experiences on our cognition, and that mental processes are responses to the surrounding world. As we interact with others, we build on shared knowledge and assumptions, co-create meaning and co-ordinate our actions (Atkinson, 2014). To highlight the fundamentally integrated nature of embodied and sociocultural cognition, Atkinson (2014) speaks of the mindbodyworld. Since our cognition depends on the mental and embodied processes but are also in constant connection to the surrounding social and physical world, the individual and the context are to be regarded as one whole system, instead of two (Atkinson, 2010). As noted by Mercer (2011a), this view helps foreground the importance of individual agency, where all such social and personal dimensions are at play (as discussed further in Section 5.2.4).
Speaking to this point, arguing for a sociocognitive stance more rooted in Bakhtinian theory, Dufva (2009) claims that the cognitive and the social elements are reciprocal and “mutually inclusive” (p. 41). Bakhtin (1993) underscored that we all, as unique individuals, occupy a unique place in time and space in any given moment, that can never be shared or fully understood by anyone else. Our thoughts and beliefs always reflect a certain situated perspective and while we are agents involved in interaction with our present social situation, we are simultaneously relating to experiences of the sociocultural structures and practices that have formed earlier. This is what Linell calls “double dialogicality” (2009, p. 31), which refers to the simultaneous interaction between individual and context on the one hand, and between the present and the past on the other. This perspective thus dissolves the dichotomies between the cognitive and the social, as well as inner and outer dimensions of the human experience (Dufva, 2010, 2013).

Given the interest in the variety of learners’ responses to classroom interaction, sociocognitivist and dialogic perspectives are needed to complement a sociocultural understanding by highlighting the importance of both the present and the past for our cognition, and foregrounding the role of individual experience and emotion in the learning situation.

5.1.3 Meaning-making
A central feature of Vygotskian theory is language as the primary mediation tool for interaction and learning. Children appropriate language and use speech to regulate their own behavior (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007), shape ideas and construct knowledge (Alanen, 2003). The sociocultural impact on our thinking is highlighted in the Bakhtinian notion of voice (1981, p. 272), that suggests that cognition and speech reflect values and assumptions of the surrounding discourses in our social context. While we express our thoughts and intentions, and position ourselves, we make use of the linguistic resources that we have appropriated, and that therefore bear traces of the thoughts, expressions and values of other people. Linell (2014), however, warns against the term appropriation, as it may lead us to think of knowledge as a unidirectional transfer of something static. Moreover, dialogic and sociocognitive perspectives consider language to be a practice rather than an object or a tool (Atkinson, 2002; Linell, 2009).

Expanding the dialogical philosophy of language by Bakhtin (1981, 1993) and Rommetveit (1984, 1992), the current dialogical theory of human cognition and interaction has been developed by Linell (2009) and Dufva
This dialogic perspective holds communication and cognition to be inseparable. Conversations are co-constructed with utterances that are linked together and build on each other. Regardless of whether participants agree or disagree, their interaction is an ongoing process of turn-taking as they anticipate, interpret and negotiate meaning and understanding (Marková, 2016). Dialogue requires inferences, since our knowledge and sociocultural understanding of situations is partly shared, but partly hidden and individual, as we use language according to our own personal knowledge and experience (Rommetveit, 1984). Each utterance is created and gains meaning in the present, connecting to both past and future discourses, which foregrounds the situated nature of interaction. A repeated utterance reflects new meaning. Hence, language does not precede or represent thinking, but shapes knowledge (Swain & Deters, 2007). As cognitive processes extend into the physical and social world, and build on interactional meaning-making, the social environment is part of “the cognitive working space of the person(s) involved” (Dufva, 2013, p. 3). These perspectives will prove to be important for the methodological aspects of the thesis project as well as the understanding of the findings.

Having introduced the theoretical assumptions underpinning the thesis, the rest of the chapter will address the relevant conceptual repertoire.

### 5.2 Conceptual framework

The concepts used in this thesis are abstract, complex and interrelated, as illustrated by the fact that many of them are used to help define another. Theorizing and researching these concepts is in itself problematic as it means separating them from a holistic whole. As pointed out by Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), “How can something be either a thought or a behavior or an emotion?” (p. 162). Nevertheless, in order to operationalize, analyze and discuss the findings in the present thesis, the following sections attempt to define the relevant concepts, that are in reality understood to be intertwined to the point where they form complex and dynamic systems and may in reality be inseparable.

In the subsequent sections, the concepts will be introduced following the order in which they appear in the studies. First, emotions are addressed, followed by a section focusing on FLA, before moving on to learner beliefs and sense of agency. Then, two Vygotskyan concepts are accounted for:
5.2.1 Emotion
The strong bias towards perspectives where cognitive and/or social aspects of learning are predominant, and the fact that emotions are not possible to objectively observe, may explain the absence of emotions in second language acquisition research (Ross, 2015; Swain, 2013). Swain (2013) refers to emotions as “the elephants in the room – poorly studied, poorly understood, seen as inferior to rational thought” (p. 205). Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) declare that “perhaps the greatest omission of the classic ID [individual difference] paradigm is that it barely acknowledges the central role of emotions in human thought and behavior, even though affect is an unavoidable component of any attempt to understand the nature of learner characteristics” (p. 9). During the last decade, however, affective and emotional aspects in learning and meaning-making have gained scholarly attention (Lantolf & Swain, 2020; Pavlenko, 2013; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Ross, 2015; van Lier, 2013).

The terms affect and emotion are often used interchangeably in academic literature. Some point out that affect is used as an umbrella term, involving emotional but also cognitive aspects such as beliefs and motivation (Martínez Agudo, 2018; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Others (e.g., Barrett, 2017) restrict affect to refer to basic human sensations that we assess in terms of the degree of pleasure and arousal they evoke. I will not make a distinction between the terms emotion and affect throughout the thesis, but use them to refer to our individual, conscious, spontaneous and involuntary reactions to experiences and perceptions of physical, cognitive or contextual stimuli (in line with Ross, 2015).

Swain (2013) suggests that emotions interact with cognition to the extent that the two may be indivisible. Especially in the case of children, the interconnected nature of emotions, thoughts and behaviors must be regarded in order to understand their learning, performance and attitudes (Butler, 2017). Emotions are involved in meaning-making, impact attention as well as strategy use, cognitive processes and motivation (Arnold, 2011; Bown & White, 2010; C. Kim & Pekrun, 2014; Pekrun, 2014). Situations that evoke negative emotions may be disadvantageous to learning in several ways. Dealing and coping with negative emotion consumes energy and focus, making tasks more challenging. Consequently, learning experiences become
less motivating and less pleasant (Arnold, 2011). Martínez Agudo (2018) points out the necessity of teachers to consider the emotional aspect of their profession and the impact of emotion on learners in their classrooms. Moreover, emotions have a contagious element, and can spread in a group (Pekrun, 2014).

Our understanding of the interaction between emotion and cognition has been advanced by recent studies in psychology and neuroscience, that may further help explain the great variety in emotional experiences and responses from the people around us. The theory of constructed emotion (Barrett, 2017; Hoemann et al., 2019) puts forward that contrary to common beliefs about the universal features of emotional expressions and their influence on our cognition, emotions are cognitive products. Grounded in our bodily sensations and contextual perception, our minds attempt to interpret and make meaning of our state and our context to guide our actions. To do this, we make use of past experiences and conceptual understanding of reality, which are socioculturally generated. All through childhood children learn to interpret and label behavior and physical responses using appropriated emotional concepts. The theory holds that emotions are thus the result of the ongoing cognitive processes of meaning-making, where we interpret the surrounding world, but also the sensory input from the body itself, framed as emotional concepts (Barrett, 2017; Fugate et al., 2018; Hoemann et al., 2019). This meaning-making process may involve misinterpretations and inferences that may seem irrational to others. For example, physical input from our hearts, lungs or stomach may be interpreted as anxiety, related along a continuum, from panicking to feeling energized, depending on past experiences and predictions. In other words, we feel what we believe and we construct the environment that we experience. Social discourses and the way adults communicate and socialize with children thus determine how children view themselves and their own experiences, on both a cognitive and emotional level. The theory of constructed emotion aligns with the notion of dual

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3 Interestingly, as pointed out in the previous footnote, abstract and emotional concepts are, naturally, mediated by language and often lack equivalents across languages. We perceive and identify emotions that are conceptualized in alignment with our sociocultural context, reflecting accepted norms of emotional expression and behavior. Accordingly, our perception of our own emotions, as well as those of others, are affected by language (Barrett, 2017; Fugate et al., 2018; Pavlenko, 2008).
dialogism. Furthermore, these perspectives resemble Vygotsky’s concept *perezhivanie* (which will be discussed in Section 5.2.5).

### 5.2.2 FLA

In applied linguistics, FLA is one of the most, if not the most, studied emotional constructs of all (MacIntyre, 2017). First introduced by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope in 1986, it was defined rather broadly as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128). Since, it has been defined in terms of apprehension, embarrassment and frustration in connection to self-expression in a new language (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b). According to a more recent description, FLA is “the worry and negative emotional reaction when learning and using a second language and is especially relevant in a classroom where self-expression takes place” (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 3). As speaking the TL is thought to be directly related to learning, the challenge for teachers of making reluctant learners engage orally during lessons makes it a relevant topic to investigate (Swain, 2011).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b) have argued that FLA is a strong predictor for successful language learning. FLA is detrimental to learning as it impedes motivation, attitudes, learners’ self-confidence and self-assessment and reduces the willingness to speak and interact in the TL (Daubney et al., 2017; MacIntyre, 2017). It is, hence, closely related to their agency, affecting the way that learners perceive their own capacity to engage and learn (Gkonou, 2015; Oxford, 2017). MacIntyre (2017) describes the negative cycle of FLA that may be activated in situations, where learners experience difficulties in expressing themselves in the TL in front of peers:

> At this point, the irony of anxiety sets in – the anxiety reaction itself begins to exacerbate communication difficulties in a cascading, sometimes overwhelming surge of emotion. This reaction generates distracting, self-deprecating cognition (such as ‘I should know this’, ‘What’s wrong with me’, ‘I look like an idiot’) that shifts cognition towards saving face, making the best of a bad situation or even escaping from the communication altogether. (p. 25)

Thus, anxiety is an emotion that involves a range of physiological processes, like feelings of unease, worrying thoughts, physical symptoms such as sweating and raised heartbeat (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). However, it goes beyond perceived sensations of stress or tension, and is
“related to states of hypervigilance and restlessness” (Rubio-Alcalá, 2017, p. 201) and thus also has pervasive influence on thoughts and actions.

5.2.3 Learner beliefs
What learners themselves believe about language learning is of course central to their perceptions of their English instruction, of the teachers’ actions and of their own role and performance (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2011). Learner beliefs develop from, and are embedded in, sociocultural discourses. At the same time, they depend on personal experiences of social and dialogic interaction where the individual participates, negotiates and constructs meaning from a unique perspective, anchored in subjective experience (Dufva, 2003). Consequently, beliefs are both individual and social, relating to both shared discourse and personal history (Aro, 2016a; Dufva, 2003; Kalaja et al., 2018). Furthermore, as learners express beliefs, they are engaged in a dialogic process that is both situated and dynamic, but also continuous (Dufva et al., 2011; Kalaja et al., 2016).

There is no consensus on how to define beliefs, and as discussed in Chapter 4, beliefs are closely related to a range of similar constructs. According to Kalaja et al. (2018) beliefs refer to “conceptions, ideas and opinions learners have about L2 learning and teaching and language itself” (p. 222). Within the context of this thesis, the term beliefs does not entail learners’ opinions and attitudes in relation to English lessons. The notion of beliefs is understood here in a restricted sense to refer to learners’ thoughts, understandings and ideas about how English is learnt, how teaching ought to be conducted, and what the role of the teacher and learners is. It thus relates to goals, demands, processes and the benefits of activities and teaching approaches. Studies II and III set out to illustrate how learners’ beliefs relate to their actual experiences. To this end, the term beliefs does not include emotions and actual perceptions. Again, this is, of course, a simplified way of attempting to separate features of human existence that are in reality, closely interconnected.

5.2.4 Sense of agency
From a sociocultural perspective, agency is thought of in terms of behavioral control, although not belonging to the individual but placed in the mediated interaction with the affordances and constraints conditioned by context (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Within an ecological approach, van Lier (2008, p. 171) referred to agency as “action potential”, focusing on observable
behavioral signs of agency in relation to classroom affordances. Gao (2010) suggested a more individual dimension by underscoring that agency must also involve aspects of volition, and also emotion. A dialogical perspective bridges over both intra- and the interpersonal processes. Meaning-making is socially and contextually situated but “this need not, and indeed must not, deny the role of individual agency” (Linell, 2009, p. 80). According to Dufva (2013, p. 61), agency refers to the ways learners “perceive and act upon” different contexts. A dialogic understanding of agency, therefore places individual consciousness at the heart of the construct, shaped by the beliefs, preferences and experiences, where each learner responds and relates to their context from a unique perspective (Dufva, 2013; Sullivan and McCarthy, 2004). On a similar note, Lantolf and Thorne (2006) add that agency also involves “the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events” (p. 143). Learner beliefs are therefore a salient feature of agency (Gao, 2010; Mercer, 2012).

Agency is central to learning. Lantolf (2011) concludes that teaching involves “instilling some sense of successful agency” in the learner (p. 29). In fact, van Lier (2008) claims that L2 development itself equates agency. In addition, agency also refers to the learning environment itself, as “learners actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning” (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 145). Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) highlight that agency becomes central in situations when an individual feels torn in two directions and has to negotiate between options. In the case of children, Bozhovich (2009) points out that they react differently to the same situation and may “understand perfectly well the advisability and even necessity of a requirement with which they are confronted, but nevertheless refuse to submit to it simply because it comes into conflict with other needs and impulses that they are simultaneously experiencing” (p. 68).

Mercer (2011b, 2012) differentiates between two aspects of agency. A sense of agency, refers to how agentic someone feels, based on cognitive and emotional perceptions and meaning-making in relation to contextual affordances. Such a sense of agency precedes the second aspect, the agentic behavior. Similar to both beliefs and emotions, agency is thus a dynamic, contextual and social phenomenon. Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) argue that to gain a more thorough understanding of agency, studies should focus more on emotional and personal meaning-making that underpins agency, by investigating utterances and narratives of learners, rather than observable behavior.
In this thesis, sense of agency is to be understood as the way in which learners subjectively perceive and relate to the action potential in their learning context. Such a sense of agency is thought to evolve from the interaction between learners’ beliefs, expectations and perceptions, their self-concept as learners, their self-assessment, their emotion and volition in relation to the classroom atmosphere, social relations and affordances. The concept of sense of agency is central to the present research project, reflecting the view of agency as a fundamental goal of primary education at large and also as an essential component of language learning.

5.2.5 Experience and perezhivanie
Towards the end of his life Vygotsky underscored the centrality of emotion in cognition: “The affective and volitional tendency stands behind thought. Only here do we find the answer to the final ‘why’ in the analysis of thinking” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 282). Texts based on his lectures and notes published after his death have attracted the attention of researchers in recent years (e.g., Clarà, 2016; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002; Mok, 2015). In these texts, with theories that were not fully completed, Vygotsky (1994) introduced the concept, perezhivanie, focusing on subjective experiences of children. The concept is not easily translated into English (or Swedish for that matter). Terms like “lived experience” or “emotional experience” are most common (see Blunden, 2016; Mok, 2015, 2017, for overviews) and refer to the way in which individuals perceive, understand and process their experiences of social interaction (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002). In Vygotsky’s own words: “In an emotional experience [perezhivanie] we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in the emotional experience [perezhivanie]” (1994, p. 342). Thus, Vygotsky emphasizes that the concept involves the inseparable relationship between the individual and the context. Instead of studying environmental factors, Vygotsky argues, it is necessary to consider context from the perspective of the child (Vygotsky, 1994):

The emotional experience [perezhivanie] arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. Therefore, it is not any of the factors in themselves (if taken without reference to the child) which determines how they influence the future course of his development, but the same factors
refracted through the prism of the child’s emotional experience [perezhivanie].
(pp. 339–340)

Each experience is thus perceived and understood filtered, or refracted, through this subjective perezhivanie.

Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) were the first to write about perezhivanie in relation to education, to highlight affective processes involved in interaction and learning. They claim that the concept is highly relevant for language learners who face not only cognitive but also emotional challenges. Perezhivanie relies strongly on the social relationships in the classroom (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002). Incidents that may seem unimportant to those present but that are perceived as dramatic for an individual directly involved and cause excitement or embarrassment and that stick to mind. The authors argue that teachers need to be aware of the significance of perezhivanie, to sustain learners’ motivation and support their development.

Clarà (2016), however, concludes that it is not just emotional experience but the meaning-making of the whole experience that is referred to; “Any event or situation in a child’s environment will have a different effect on him depending on how far the child understands its sense and meaning” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 343). Cognition is therefore a crucial element in perezhivanie. Michell (2016) argues that the phenomenon is best understood when its intellectual properties are foregrounded, and thus describes perezhivanie as the “perceptual, meaning-oriented, sense-making process with emotional entailments” (p. 7). Similarly, Mok (2015) points out that an overemphasis on emotional aspects of perezhivanie undermines the holistic nature of the concept. The construct does not equate experience as such, but involves a holistic understanding of the role of emotion and cognition in learners’ sense-making as they cope with their environment (Blunden, 2016; Clarà, 2016). Similar to perezhivanie, Csizér and Kálmán (2019) use the term experience in relation to foreign language learning to include not only the ongoing perceptions of affective and cognitive processes in relation to stimuli from the surrounding context, but also the synthesized meaning-making that develops over time.

Vygotsky made use of the term perezhivanie to underscore that the influence of the social environment on human development is not deterministic (Lantolf & Swain, 2020). Hence, the concept may inform our understanding and consideration of why learners in the same context follow different developmental trajectories that are dependent on holistic interactions which involve personal, emotional and cognitive processes and their
subjective interpretations (Veresov & Mok, 2018). *Perezhivanie* may thus be an important component of a learners’ sense of agency, as a retrospective dimension with strong impact on their perceived action potential in the present. A dialogically-informed perspective may refer to this interaction as double dialogicality. In the field of psychology, numerous studies suggest that our brains are engaged in constant processes of prediction, where our attention is guided by previous experiences (for an overview, see Hutchinson & Barrett, 2019), which offer further support for the concept of *perezhivanie*. Notably, as a parallel to the quote by Vygotsky included above, scientists use the word “filter” to describe the way in which memory and emotion impact all human cognition (Hutchinson & Barrett, 2019, p. 281).

To summarize, the notion of *perezhivanie*, which has been found to have bearing on foreign language learning in recent years (Lantolf & Swain, 2020), thus connects to many of the concepts covered in this chapter. It adds to a more holistic understanding of the social, emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning. Furthermore, the concept serves as a backdrop for us to better grasp the idea of the ZPD and the relationship between the learner and the learning.

### 5.2.6 The ZPD

Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the ZPD has been one of his most important legacies for education. It refers to what a learner is not yet able to do independently, but with the aid or support of a more knowledgeable other. In Vygotsky’s words, the ZPD is “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86). It was not a concept that Vygotsky himself put much emphasis on (Daniels, 2001), and he did not define the nature of the support that promotes development. Nevertheless, the concept has been central to the field of language education and stresses the importance of knowing your learners and following their understanding, in order to adapt and plan instruction. Linell (2009) argues that ZPD is a “thoroughly dialogical phenomenon” (p. 86), as both the teacher and the learner are engaged in negotiation and meaning-making.

Some scholars have pointed out that the interpretation of notion of ZPD has been misinterpreted in the West to be conceptualized as a cognitive phenomenon (Levykh, 2008; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002). As discussed in the previous section, Vygotsky did not make a distinction between intellectual
and affective dimensions. Instead, the ZPD refers to holistic system of
development and learning (Levykh, 2008). In cases where learners feel
anxious or unsafe, they are less likely to benefit from and take advantage of
the teaching and the scaffolding, and the zone in which instruction is effective
thus decreases (Arnold, 2011; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002). Yet, research on
the relationship between the ZPD and emotional aspects is scarce. In order to
be a helpful pedagogical concept, teachers must include affective
considerations to fully grasp the notion of the ZPD, to support and maintain
learning and direct their instruction towards the potential of the learner.

5.3 Conclusion

In sum, the theoretical framework that forms the bases for the current study
unites perspectives from Vygotskian sociocultural theories and concepts,
sociocognitive theory and dialogism. This way, the dichotomy between
cognitive and social dimensions is rejected. To provide a more complete
understanding of YLLs and their classroom experiences, the social and
contextual nature of learning is central. At the same time, a closer
consideration for the individual learner is foregrounded, as learners' personal
histories impact the way they understand, experience and respond to their
surrounding classroom context, in constant processes of meaning-making and
reciprocal interaction. All such dimensions harmonize with the concept of
*perezhivanie*, which helps explain the heterogeneous nature of any group, with
the wide range of responses, intentions and choices among learners in the
same classroom.

Dialogic assumptions underpin the epistemological understandings of the
way in which beliefs emerge in co-constructed meaning-making, informing
the qualitative approaches in study II and III. The group discussions were
designed to create such a space of dialogic interaction, and dialogic
perspectives permeate the analysis and the interpretations of findings. The
following chapter will describe and discuss the methodological design of the
studies.
6. Method

This chapter presents the methodological choices behind the research process, expanding on the descriptions included in the articles. First comes a description of the recruitment of participants and the overall design that links the studies together. Then, the methodological considerations underlying the quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection are described. When conducting research with children, a number of considerations come into play regarding design, implementation, ethics and analysis (Pinter & Zandian, 2015; Punch, 2002). As ethical research aspects are crucial, especially when involving young learners, both for the sake of their well-being and in order to ensure the quality of the data, such considerations are included throughout the chapter. Finally, analytical processes and challenges are addressed.

6.1 Participants

6.1.1 Inclusion criteria

The purpose of study I was to obtain an overview of the prevalence of FLA in Swedish primary school, but more importantly, to illustrate the variety among learner responses to English instruction in and across classrooms. In order to draw any conclusions about triggers of FLA in young learners beyond a specific classroom, a sufficient number of students with experience of the phenomenon had to be identified. Furthermore, to focus on aspects of teaching, I sought to limit the number of variables at a group level, so that classrooms, on a macro-level, were rather similar. Three inclusion criteria were decided. Firstly, the studies focused on learners aged 8–12, years 2–5. All learners had at least some experience of English instruction, but these school years do not involve national exams or grades, which are aspects that have been found to be related to FLA. Secondly, only classrooms with teachers qualified to teach English in their specific age groups were included. As may be expected in cases where a teacher invites a researcher into the classroom, lesson observations revealed that all classrooms were socially and
pedagogically well-functioning. These classrooms met the criteria for supportive classroom environments believed to counteract anxiety (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). Thirdly, the studies involved classrooms where very few learners had mother tongues other than Swedish, since multilingualism has been found to reduce FLA (as discussed in Section 4.1.1). With these criteria, classrooms shared external conditions that are beyond the control of individual teachers, with the absence of high-stakes testing and grades, learners’ relatively abundant English exposure but without a multilingual advantage. This way, as Swedish teachers have a lot of freedom in the design of their instruction, the inclusion criteria made it possible to concentrate on contextual triggers of FLA in classrooms with varied approaches and activities.4

6.1.2 Recruiting teachers
The young participants were recruited through their teachers. I contacted four teachers through their principals, one I knew from before, as a distant colleague, and one through a former colleague at Stockholm University. For reasons accounted for in the following section, one other teacher, who was known to me from my previous study (Nilsson, 2013) was invited later on. The seven teachers were informed about the purpose of the study in rather general terms, namely that I was interested in the perspective of the learners’ and their experiences related to oral interaction in English.

6.1.3 The school and classroom contexts
The classrooms involved in the studies belonged to municipal schools, in urban and suburban areas in the Stockholm region. Without breaching confidentiality, it can be revealed that all six schools had socioeconomic indices of below 100, according to statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2020), indicating that a school is situated

4 Of course, as discussed in Section 2.2, any group of young learners is heterogeneous as far as maturity, personal characteristics, special needs and so forth. However, this is to be expected in any classroom and part of the everyday challenges facing teachers. These variables were not controlled for, as it would have presented ethical and methodological challenges. More importantly, the purpose was not to focus on personal dimensions and underlying reasons for individual reactions, but rather to investigate FLA as a classroom phenomenon, looking at aspects that trigger FLA, as stated in Section 1.3.
in a socioeconomically stable area. Thus, the participating learners were fairly similar with regard to their socioeconomic (as well as linguistic) background. Consequently, the classrooms where this research project was conducted are not representative of the Swedish context at large.

In all the participating classrooms, the atmosphere was observed to be warm and supportive. Hence, they offered conditions favorable for the development of agency (Sairanen & Kumpulainen, 2014) and the countering of FLA (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). All learners had started with English in school by the time they were in year 2. Most often, according to the teachers, it had been introduced gradually, before there were specific English lessons.

6.1.4 Inviting young learners

How to present and inform young people about the purpose of a research project requires thorough practical and ethical consideration. During an initial classroom visit, I introduced myself and spoke in general terms about the purpose of my study, namely to learn about the thoughts and experiences of young learners of English in Swedish in primary school. Learners were told that their perspectives would contribute with valuable knowledge for researchers, and may help inform the development of language instruction. The YLLs were addressed as experts, in the sense that they have thorough experiences of being young students of English in Swedish primary education at present, that adults have not.

Especially in the case of children, an important ethical issue also revolves around offering them comprehensible and specific information about what participation implies. To support active assent, such information should be presented orally and discussed together with children (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Nonetheless, it may be difficult for children to anticipate how they will

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5 This measure is based on, for instance, the educational background of parents and the degree of social welfare support, where a low index number corresponds to high socioeconomic status. Due to urban segregation, index numbers above 200 are not uncommon in some areas, and indices below 100 are common in others.

6 The terms consent and assent are continuously discussed among scholars (Adderley et al., 2015; Dalli & Te One, 2012). In the formal sense, researchers need to obtain consent from parents to involve under-aged participants in their studies. Adderley et al. (2015) argue that children should also consent, as the term includes the idea that they should be thoroughly informed and encouraged to reflect and make their own decisions, which, according to the
Furthermore, when collection is conducted in a setting familiar to the learners, and in ways that strive not to take them out of their comfort zone, a potential risk is that they perceive that they do not have an actual choice about whether or not to participate, since they are usually meant to abide by what adults in school ask them to do (Powell, 2012). In fact, school norms of conformity most often demand that children take part in activities without active assent (Kirby, 2020). Therefore, it was stressed that participation was completely optional and that learners could withdraw their assent at any time if they did not want to take part in the two activities.

In addition to the crucial issues related to assent, Resnik (2018) highlights the ethical principles of educational and social responsibility in research. My intention was to provide young participants with some insight about the ethics involved in research. I introduced and explained terms such as informant, data, confidentiality, parental consent, assent and dissertation, and learners were encouraged to ask questions. I hoped that they would find it interesting to participate in research in general, and especially to take part in group discussions and share their experiences and perspectives. Such benefits refer to educative authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 250), that allows participants to gain new insight about themselves but also others, during the research process.

Learners were informed that participation would consist of filling out a questionnaire where they were to agree or disagree with a number of statements, and, on another occasion, sit in groups and discuss questions about their beliefs and experiences of being language learners in school. It was clarified that data collection had nothing to do with their proficiency in any way, and would be conducted entirely in Swedish. Furthermore, it was stressed that the questions I would ask did not have a right or wrong answer, which may be especially important to emphasize in the case of children (Scott, 2000). Since young learners may also find it difficult to choose to terminate their participation (Resnik, 2018), due to peer pressure or the power imbalance between children and adults, I explained these conditions as thoroughly as possible during the first visit and also reminded learners in connection to data collection. Moreover, it was underscored that the data from the questionnaires authors, most school-aged children are old enough to do. In their view, the term assent should be used when children have not been presented with thorough information or are not mature enough to grasp what participation entails. The term active assent will therefore be used here, to clarify that learners were fully informed about the study and opted to take part, given that they had parental consent. Section 6.3 will discuss the terms consent and assent further.
and the group recordings would not be passed on to their teachers, parents or anyone else at the school. The questionnaire results at group level would be shared with their teacher, but without revealing scores or responses of individual learners.

For the current project, learners informed and active assent as well as parental legal consent were obtained; learners who were willing to participate were asked to hand a consent form to their parents or caregivers to sign and then return these to their teacher. These consent forms contained information about the project and conditions of participation addressing the children on one side and their parents or caregivers on the other. In other words, parental consent meant that caregivers gave their permission for their children to participate in case they wanted to. The consent forms were printed on green paper, to help learners keep track of them. This proved to be a good idea. It made it easier to remind learners, by referring to “the green paper” rather than to a consent form about a certain research study, and any green papers spotted on the floor or hanging out of a backpack could be rescued. Of the invited learners, 9% did not participate in the study, either because they did not turn in their consent forms or because they were absent at the time of data collection. Some returned their green forms after the questionnaire had been administrated. They were allowed to take part in the group discussions and then completed the questionnaire afterwards. The group discussion activity could not be repeated this way. Two learners received consent from their parents but still chose not to participate. Hence, parental consent did not override the children’s own choice to dissent (Adderley et al., 2015).

The data collection began in November, 2015, and was piloted in two classrooms, taught by two different teachers. With a few adjustments made in the wording of discussion prompts (as discussed in Section 6.2.3 below), the activities were found to be appropriate for the age groups and the purpose, and the two classrooms thus formed part of the study as a whole. Four more teachers were recruited, one of whom taught three parallel groups. Following the analysis of the questionnaire results in these classrooms, where FLA was found to be much more common in a TL-only classroom than in the rest of the sample, another teacher with a TL-only approach was invited and accepted to take part, with her two groups of learners. Data collection ended in September 2017. By then, 225 learners, in ten classrooms, taught by seven teachers at six schools, had taken part.

Following the data collection and the analyses of the questionnaire data, I returned to the schools for a meeting with each teacher, where I presented the class results, without revealing the identity of individual learners. That way,
teachers were informed about the specific focus of my study, data collection activities, and the levels of FLA in their respective groups, which they found interesting, but most often not surprising.

6.2 Data collection design

The thesis is explorative, its purpose being to gain a deeper understanding of how young learners perceive and respond to foreign language instruction, especially those learners for whom interaction in the new language involves negative emotions. To this end, the design initially aimed to identify the prevalence of FLA among a large group of learners in several classrooms, using a quantitative method that would be perceived as non-threatening to young learners. Study I thus served as a baseline, informing further investigations of a qualitative nature, to access more of the subjective and personal experiences of frequently anxious learners.

Study II focused on beliefs and experiences in the one classroom, where learners had received English instruction in the same context, and with the highest number of learners who frequently experienced FLA. While a questionnaire was a suitable instrument to collect data on a specific and possibly sensitive topic such as FLA, a more qualitative method was needed to allow children to voice their beliefs and understandings of the language learning process, and their approach as language learners. Therefore, group discussions were orchestrated, where learners discussed open questions. Findings were analyzed inductively, focusing on beliefs and experiences. Based on the results from study II, study III brought together data from frequently anxious learners in seven other classrooms, and a deductive analysis was conducted to compare the findings to those of study II. Taken together, the thesis consists of three studies tied together as a mixed methods project.

In practice, data collection involved classroom visits on 4–6 occasions with each teacher. The questionnaire was administered on one such occasion, and group discussions were conducted on another, a few lessons or weeks later (depending on the preference of each teacher). None of the teachers were present in the classrooms during the two activities. As children’s behavior and attitudes are heavily influenced by the different contexts in which they find themselves (Scott, 2000), it was beneficial that data collection could be conducted in their regular classrooms. All instructions and activities were conducted in Swedish. During the questionnaire activity, the learners who
were not participating in the study either remained in the classroom, drawing, or left with their teacher. During the group discussions, the non-participating learners went to another room with the teacher, for some other activity. The teachers assured me that learners were used to working one-to-one or in small groups with the teacher, or other adults. Having non-participating learners remain in the classroom, while finding another room for all the participating learners, would have been unpractical, and would still not have achieved the goal of not affecting those who were not involved in the study.

6.2.1 Observations
Observations were carried out in all the participating classrooms, for familiarization with the contexts. Descriptive notes (Bryman, 2012) were taken by hand, focusing on activities, work mode, target language use, learner participation, metalinguistic aspects and so forth. In the first two classrooms, where the study was piloted, the observations served the purpose of informing the content of the questionnaire and the discussion topics, to make sure that items would refer to classroom practices that the learners were accustomed to, and in the case of the remaining classrooms, to confirm that the same items would be appropriate. Furthermore, in all ten classrooms, the observations offered an overview that served as a backdrop to the study as a whole and revealed similarities and differences between classrooms. In addition, as I was not involved in the group discussions, the contextual insight played an important role to help interpret the recorded group discussions, where learners made references to routines or activities from their respective classrooms.

During the observations, I sat at the back of the classroom. I did not actively take part in the lessons, but was sometimes addressed by the teacher who could ask for a word or for me to help model a short interaction to the class. Many learners would greet me as I arrived to the classroom. Sometimes, a learner would ask me for help during the lesson. Thus, my role was that of a reactive observer. It is possible that my presence had an impact on learners’ willingness to volunteer and speak English during lessons. However, the presence of other adults, such as teachers and teacher students, in the classrooms was not unusual, and the teachers themselves claimed that my presence did not have any noticeable effect on the learners. Apart from the initial classroom visit and the observations, my interaction with learners was limited to leading the questionnaire activity and initiating the group discussions.
6.2.2 Questionnaire

A self-report quantitative questionnaire was employed in the ten classrooms investigated in Study I, in order to get a snapshot and diagnostic overview and to access the reactions of a large number of young learners in the current setting. An important ethical consideration was how to best approach YLLs and have them report on a potentially sensitive topic of FLA and it was crucial to design a method that did not itself risk sparking anxiety in participants (Gregersen et al., 2014). A questionnaire was therefore thought to be an appropriate method of collecting data. This way, learners could respond to ready-made statements in a rather impersonal way, and not have to formulate responses themselves but simply circle response options on a Likert scale, indicating frequency of certain emotional reactions. In addition, the responses signaled that a variety of different reactions were possible, and expected, in relation to classroom procedures. An odd number of response options on the Likert scale meant that learners could opt for a neutral answer, as this was thought to generate more valid data. In addition, it was thought more appropriate not to force learners to choose between a positive or a negative response, for ethical reasons.

Consequently, a questionnaire was developed, inspired by the 33-item FLCAS, but modified for this purpose and context. The scope of the questionnaire was reduced to 7 items, considering the young age of the participants. Furthermore, it was crucial that items would be relevant to the learners in their classroom context, and formulated in a language that was comprehensible and appropriate. Four initial questions were added, focusing on learner’s attitudes and preferred activities, as a warm-up and a way of familiarizing learners to the Likert-scale response format. (See Article I, Nilsson, 2019, for a more detailed rationale and description of items and response options. See the appendix for questionnaire items, in Swedish and English).

Introducing the questionnaire activity in the classrooms, I underscored that all kinds of different responses were of importance to the study. The participants were encouraged to take their time and ask for clarifications if needed. To avoid having some learners run through the activity, misinterpret or have difficulties reading the items, each item was read out loud and learners only had a questionnaire with the alternative responses to all the numbered items. Because children are more likely to choose a response that appears first on a list (Scott, 2000), responses indicative of FLA were put last, to the right on the paper, for all items. Hence, possible consequences of any such bias result in levels of FLA being downplayed rather than exaggerated. To increase
confidentiality, all learners covered their answers with a blank sheet of paper, while completing the questionnaire, and were allowed to draw on it as they waited for the next item to be introduced. This contributed to a calm atmosphere in the groups and allowed learners plenty of time to consider their responses. The whole activity, including instructions, took 20–30 minutes to complete.

6.2.3 Group discussions
Studies II and III focused on learners’ beliefs and experiences in relation to the process of language learning. The purpose of a more in-depth understanding of their perspectives required an approach that would allow and encourage learners to express themselves in their own words. Furthermore, ethical as well as practical requirements had to be regarded. A design was needed that would make all learners feel safe enough to choose to participate, not only the more confident ones. Most of the children were eager to be involved in the research project, and I had underscored that all children and their opinions were of interest for the study. Consequently, I wanted to include all consenting learners in the activity. Excluding some would have felt unfair and unethical and I wanted their contribution to research to be a shared classroom experience. However, practical issues were equally important. In order for teachers to allow me into their classrooms, data collection could not be too time-consuming and disruptive to the everyday school schedule. An activity that could be conducted within a few regular lessons had to be designed.

I chose not to conduct interviews, for reasons of efficiency and access. The children who frequently felt uneasy during English lessons were less likely to volunteer for interviews. In addition, many children are not used to communicating in one-to-one situations with unfamiliar adults, and may therefore produce less elaborate answers (Ravet, 2007). Presumably, frequently anxious learners may feel exposed or choose not to participate. Focus group interviews were another option. This approach has been found suitable for children from the age of around 8 (Agar et al., 2005). It downplays the role of the researcher, increases time for consideration and negotiation, and allows learners to benefit from peer support and interaction. Consequently, as learners listen to peers sharing experiences, they may feel encouraged and empowered to talk about matters that they might not explicitly have thought about previously. Still, this did not solve the problem of time.
Instead, a model of autonomous group discussions was designed and implemented. Group conversations among learners, without a participating adult, were assumed to feel safer and not take learners too far outside their comfort zone. The children were seated in groups of 3 (sometimes 4), with learners who had reported similar levels of FLA in the questionnaire, for two reasons. Firstly, it was assumed to be ethical and beneficial to interaction. Children who feel more nervous about English than other school subjects, or who may feel shy about speaking in general, are likely to feel safer and more comfortable in group conversations with peers who are not far more confident about English than they are. Scholars have concluded an advantage of having focus group participants share an important feature (Agar et al., 2005; Alderson et al., 2005). Secondly, this setup way was valuable in order to investigate whether groups of differing levels of FLA also voiced differing beliefs about language learning. The learners themselves were, however, not aware of the rationale behind these group constellations. The teachers, who were not present during the time of data collection, were presented with a list of their learners, unaware that learners were listed according to FLA scores (as measured by the questionnaire). They were not able to conclude the rationale behind the lists, but confirmed that the order did not correspond to language proficiency. This made it possible to group the learners according to their total questionnaire score, as the criterion was assumed not to be obvious to the learners. Attempting to ensure a supportive atmosphere for all children, teachers were consulted and asked to suggest any adjustments to the group constellations, for social reasons. Although the aim was to gather learners with frequent FLA into separate groups, this was not always possible, due to these social adjustments, but also because of absent learners and the fact that some classrooms only had one learner with frequent FLA. Hence, some groups contained both frequently anxious learners and one or two learners that were close to the cut-off point for frequent FLA. Groups referred to as groups of frequently anxious learners\(^7\) thus all had a mean group score above this cut-off point.

The group discussion approach reflected a dialogic understanding of emergent beliefs (Dufva, 2003), as it allowed learners to engage in meaning-making, where they could discuss, co-construct, negotiate, build on previous utterances, agree or question and engage to different extents. Moreover, the problem of power dynamics between an adult researcher and the young children was solved. The less formal setting allowed the children to speak and

\(^7\) Referred to as high-anxiety groups in studies I and II.
interact with their classmates in a way that any adult presence may have inhibited. This choice had several practical consequences. The activity could be completed in each classroom within one lesson and was thus a lot more efficient than the other options. It also resembled other kinds of group activities which the learners were used to.

The whole procedure of introducing and completing the activity took about 30 minutes. Clear instructions were important to compensate for lack of adult involvement as soon as the activity had started. Learners were reminded that they would be discussing questions that do not have correct answers and they were encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences with their peers. In addition, they were encouraged to take turns speaking, ask each other and try to make sure everyone in the group got a chance to contribute. Collaborative, rather than competitive elements were thus stressed, while the activity also allowed them to engage to the extent that they wanted to. Learners were asked to take turns to draw questions out of a box, read it out loud and initiate a discussion (see Figure 1). Each group had a small audio-recorder and a three-minute sand hourglass on their table, to encourage them to elaborate on each question as much as possible instead of rushing off to the next.

**Figure 1**

*Discussion prompts and an hourglass, handed out to each group*

The questions were based on previous observations in several classrooms and inspired by studies on learner beliefs with adults (Benson & Lor, 1999; Horwitz, 1988) and children (Kolb, 2007). The items aimed to prompt
discussions centering on beliefs about language learning, the purpose of learning English, their own oral production and their approach to interacting and learning. The questions were formulated to be brief and clear without being leading or putting words into the mouths of the young learners (see the appendix for questions in Swedish and English), for example:

- What is the best way for you to learn English? Tell me.

At the same time, offering learners two options was thought beneficial to get children started, with clear choices and words to use:

- What do you think is most important when you speak English – that what you say is correct or that others understand what you mean, although you may say things a bit incorrectly?
- Do you think it’s good or bad that the teacher speaks a lot of English even though the students may not understand everything? Explain what you think.

Initially, each group used one of two sets of questions. These questions were piloted in the two first classrooms and found to generate valuable data. A few revisions were made, to adjust word order or commas to make sure that the meaning would not change in case learners stressed different words. For example, one learner read the question *Tycker du att det är smart att chansa när man inte kan ett ord på engelska?* ‘Do you think it’s smart to guess when you don’t know a word in English?’, putting the emphasis on *ett ord* ‘a word’, which made it sound as if the question referred to guessing in English in situations where one does not know a single word of English, instead of, as intended, if there is a word one does not know. Questions were written on green and white paper slips, where the green were prioritized questions and the white were discussed if learners had time. The questions on white slips were green in other groups and vice versa, to ensure that all prompts came up in at least some of the groups in each classroom.

6.2.4 Data overview

Table 2 presents an overview of the empirical data collected in this project. In total, data consist of background classroom observations that informed the questionnaire items and group discussions prompts, and also facilitated qualitative analysis where learners referred to certain classroom routines or activities. Group discussion data were collected from 62 group discussions.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) In total, 63 group discussions were conducted, but one recording, with a group of learners with occasional FLA, failed, unfortunately.
Article II and III built on 18 of these discussions, which amounted to almost 7 hours in total.

Table 2

Overview of the empirical data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection procedure</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Amount of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Activities, routines, use of English, learner engagement</td>
<td>25 lessons (2–4 with each group, 3–6 with each teacher)</td>
<td>Open field notes: background data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>FLA a</td>
<td>Responses from 225 learners in 10 classrooms</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>7 responses from each learner = 1575 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group discussions I</td>
<td>Learners’ beliefs and experiences</td>
<td>26 learners in one classroom</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>8 discussions (20–28 min) = 200 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group discussions III</td>
<td>Learners’ beliefs and experiences</td>
<td>31 frequently anxious learners in seven classrooms b</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>10 discussions (15–28 min) = 214 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a FLA = foreign language anxiety.

b Or more precisely, 25 frequently anxious learners and 6 learners with occasional experiences of FLA (in order to form appropriate groups as discussed in Section 6.2.3).

6.3 Ethical consideration and value judgements

The research project was conducted in agreement with the guiding principles of the Swedish Research Council (2017). As described in the previous sections, efforts were made to be as transparent and clear as possible about the purpose and the procedures of data collection, so that learners gave active and informed assent. The issue of whether to use the term consent or assent
connects to dilemmas and tensions associated with conducting research with children, as highlighted by Quennerstedt et al. (2014); the formal aspects of ethics in research emphasize children’s need for protection and the risk of exploitation, whereas scholars seek to develop research practices that foreground the competencies and the voices of children, in agreement with the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Along similar lines of argument, Heath et al. (2005) add that the demand for parental consent may undermine children’s agency and their right to be listened to and make decisions on their own behalf. Furthermore, as pointed out by Alderson et al. (2005), it is not clear-cut what parental consent entails; do we assume that parents consult the child, or act in the best interest of the child? As in the present project, while abiding to the legal ethical aspects, other ethical dilemmas remain; some learners were eager to participate but were not allowed to as they failed to present parental consent. For children with parents not living together, the process of obtaining consent from both caregivers may be an obstacle, which, moreover, biases the sample.

Once learners have turned in consent forms from their caregivers, they may feel obliged to go through the activities involved in data collection (Kirby, 2020). Therefore, an important stance in research with children is that even though the procedure of obtaining parental consent has been completed, assent is an ongoing process where the researcher must be observant and remind children that they have the right at any stage to withdraw their assent (Dalli & Te One, 2012; Heath et al., 2007; Kirby, 2020). As mentioned above, two learners opted out before the questionnaire activity. The design sought to ensure that participation would be a positive and informative experience where learners did not feel exposed. In the group discussions, a few learners made limited contributions, which may, however, have been a form of exercising dissent.

Apart from practical issues involved in research with young participants, a number of value judgements were made in the process of the research project. For example, the choice to focus on the voices of young learners and the claim that this is an important aspect that can inform early language education is in itself a value judgement. So is the conviction that FLA is unwelcome and should be counteracted in language education, especially at primary level, in agreement with the national policy documents and prominent researchers in the field (Horwitz, 2017; MacIntyre, 2017). As for publishing and disseminating research, the articles published so far (Nilsson, 2019, 2020a) are available through Open Access.
6.4 Analyses

6.4.1 Descriptive statistical analysis
In order to identify a group of learners with frequent experiences of FLA and compare their beliefs and experiences to those of their peers, a cut-off point had to be established, to define this group. This is, again, a matter of judgement that has considerable impact on the interpretation of the results. The threshold was set at 1 SD. This coincided with the middle of the scale; learners with a mean score above sometimes, who opted for responses indicating that they often, almost always or always experienced the negative emotions that each item referred to, were categorized as frequently anxious learners (referred to in study I and II as high-anxiety learners, discussed further in Section 7.1).

Quantitative instruments are most often used to generate data for inductive statistical analysis, with the purpose of drawing conclusions that are generalizable to a larger population and other settings, although this presents a number of challenges related to operationalization, context and language (as discussed in Section 4.1.1). In this case, the analysis was limited to descriptive statistics and percentages, since the purpose of the study was to describe and illustrate frequencies and distributions within these specific groups of learners, with regards to FLA. Although based on nominal/numerical survey questionnaire data visualized in tables, the study may very well instead be considered a multiple (or nested) case study, as it aimed to investigate a certain phenomenon in specific settings at a specific time. Nevertheless, contextualizing and examining the distribution and variation of responses associated with FLA in similar classrooms may illuminate the complexity of the construct in YLLs in a way that is relevant to consider in other contexts as well. The aim was for the analysis to be as transparent as possible and as the results of study I are reported item for item, the reader can more easily make sense of the data although they may not agree with a specific threshold.

6.4.2 Qualitative content analysis
Based on dialogic epistemological assumptions, the qualitative data generated in each group discussion were regarded as a joint, context-dependent whole. Utterances may reflect the thoughts and experiences of individuals but are also shaped by the situation, the activity and the other group participants. Furthermore, the voices of the participants reflect not only the ideas and
meaning-making of the group in question, but also discourses from the institutional and societal context (Dufva et al., 2004). The learners in the current project may have tentatively made suggestions, withheld information or said things to try to convince themselves or others. Alternative group constellations would have generated other content. The participants discussed, interacted, adapted to the conversation, built on what the others said and communicated nonverbally. The fact that data could be analyzed at an individual level was, however, not a problem, but aligns well with the aim to investigate beliefs and experiences among groups of young learners, rather than of individual learners. Each group conversation was thus regarded as a unit of analysis, a layered case within the larger cases of the present classrooms (Patton, 2002). While each conversation was deconstructed into codes related to the research questions, these interpretations were made in relation to the context and the discussion as a whole.

However, in spite of these dialogic assumptions, the analysis itself did not have a dialogic research focus, as it did not aim to investigate how this meaning-making occurred and developed. Instead, guided by the present research questions, which focus more on the content conveyed by these learners, qualitative content analysis (QCA) was conducted. QCA is used in human sciences and is especially common in nursing and social science (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). It focuses on subjective experiences and contextual phenomena. QCA can be regarded an umbrella term that spans over different processes and stages (and that may also involve quantitative elements, although this is not the case in the present thesis). The group discussion data in study II and III were analyzed following the terminology, guidelines and procedural stages described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). According to these authors, the benefits of QCA is that it facilitates the identification of similarities and differences in empirical data. The analysis considers both manifest levels of meaning, that is, low levels of interpretation where the analysis stays close to the data, and latent content,  

9 QCA is common in nursing studies aiming to illuminate and explore individuals’ subjective experience of being a patient, undergoing certain treatment or living under certain conditions. Not taking the analogy too far, and keeping in mind that YLLs are assumed to be healthy individuals, there are several similarities that motivate the use of QCA in the present thesis. Both YLLs and patients are individuals who cope with and take part in activities that they have not themselves chosen and may have little control over. Furthermore, they are most often surrounded by other people, both “helping professionals” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 320) and relatives, who they need to interact with and who may influence them, their actions, emotions, values and perceptions.
where underlying meanings and themes are inferred, in search of “a meaningful ‘essence’ that runs through the data” (Morse, 2008, p. 727).

Several dimensions of interpretation were involved during the process of data collection and analysis. First, as the participants interpreted the discussion topics and co-constructed meaning during the activity, and then, during the analysis, when I interacted with the transcriptions to construct and infer meaning. This view aligns well with a dialogic understanding of interpretation and sense-making. Important to keep in mind is that there is no absolute truth that is sought, rather I try to present “the most probable meaning” (Graneheim et al., 2017, p. 33). Other aspects of interpretation have to do with research on children by an adult researcher. There is a risk that findings are based on what I as an adult understand, rather than on what the children actually mean and are able to formulate (Spyrou, 2011). Furthermore, my own attitudes, values, memories and experiences of childhood, and also of language teaching, may inform my understanding and analysis (Alderson et al., 2005; Veresov & Mok, 2018). I attempted to approach the data without preconceived notions about what to find (also because previous research looking into this is so limited), seen against the backdrop of the conversation as a whole, as well as the classroom contexts.

All 62 audio-recorded group discussions were transcribed. As the focus was not on language itself and the way learners interact, transcriptions were not verbatim, but represented what learners said, including pauses and fillers. Differentiating between learners’ voices was sometimes challenging, especially if the utterance was quite brief, but got easier as I repeatedly listened to the recordings. However, as the unit of analysis was each conversation, the co-constructed interactions were in focus. (In the process of translating excerpts for the articles and this extended summary, staying close to the Swedish wording of the learners was prioritized, which at times resulted in unidiomatic formulations.)

Guided by the research questions in study II, an inductive data-driven analysis was conducted. Following the procedures of QCA of Graneheim and Lundman (2004), meaning units were identified and highlighted, and then condensed, or abstracted (see Table 3). This was done with the aim of making the data more manageable while maintaining the essence of each utterance. In the case of children speaking, this proved beneficial as they included a great deal of fillers and iterations. The abstractions were coded. This process stayed close to the voices of learners, covered manifest content and sought to keep interpretation at a minimum (Graneheim et al., 2017). However, the observations were helpful to contextualize what learners referred to as they
### Table 3

**Examples of transcribed data condensed into meaning units and then codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Meaning unit</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asså, det beror på vad det är, om det är liksom nåt såhär som jag</td>
<td><em>Om det är något som jag tycker är jättesvårt i engelska,</em> då blir jag</td>
<td><em>Om något är svårt blir jag jättetrött, det blir så svårt att det inte är kul</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tycker är jättesvårt... I engelskan då blir jag jätte... då blir jag</td>
<td>liksom jättetrött, och liksom såhär... för... för att då, då tycker jag det är så svårt så att det inte blir kul*</td>
<td>If something is really hard I get really tired, it gets too hard to be fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>såhär liksom jättetrött, och liksom såhär... för... för att då, då</td>
<td>*If it’s something that I find really hard in English, I get like really</td>
<td>I learn best from simple oral activities where you get to reason in English pairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tycker jag det är så svårt så att det inte blir kul</td>
<td>tired, and kind of... cause... cause, then I find it too hard to be fun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well, it depends on what it is, if it something that I like find really</td>
<td>*I think I learn best, when you like, if it’s actually a pretty simple</td>
<td>I learn best from rather simple oral activities where you get to reason in English pairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard... in the English lessons, then I get really... I get like really</td>
<td>activity... in English, and you have to speak English with... the one you’re</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tired, and kind of... cause... cause, then I find it too hard to be fun</td>
<td>working with, and you have to... talk about it, it’s not rea... the activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jag tycker jag lär mig bäst, när man liksom, om det är någon ändå,</em></td>
<td>itself isn’t that difficult but the point is that you have to reason together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ganska enkel uppgift egentligen... på engelska, och så ska man</td>
<td>in English, then I usually learn, pretty... well, much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prata engelska med... den man jobbar med, och så ska man... prata</td>
<td><em>Jag lär mig bäst när man får ganska enkla talövnningar och man får resona</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>om det, så det inte jå... själva uppgiften är inte jättesvår men</td>
<td><em>att resonerera på engelska i par</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poängen är att man ska resonerata på engelska med varandra, då</td>
<td>I learn best from rather simple oral activities where you get to reason in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brukar jag lär mig, ganska... mycket</td>
<td>English pairs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>Meaning unit</td>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... någon annan, som man känner sig trygg med och kan prata med, om man delar in sig i grupper med dem, och S [läraren] kanske, så kan man prata engelska där liksom så man lär sig... ifall man har såhär att man ska läsa på engelska, ur någon bok eller nånting, så kan man läsa för dem man är trygg med, för annars så blir det rätt... ifall, då blir man inte lika rädd ifall man säger fel</td>
<td>Om man får sitta i en trygg grupp då man ska prata eller läsa engelska blir man inte lika rädd ifall man säger fel</td>
<td>I en trygg grupp blir man inte lika rädd att säga fel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... someone else, that you feel safe with and can talk to, if you split into groups with them, and S [the teacher] maybe, you can speak English there, so you learn... if you have like, that you are going to read in English, from a book of something, you can read to those you feel safe with, cause if not it gets, if, you don’t get as afraid of making mistakes</td>
<td>If you get to sit in a safe group, when you are going to talk or read in English, you don’t get as afraid of making mistakes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men om man härmar när de pratar engelska, om det är en vuxen som pratar engelska och man själv härmar vad den säger, det är ju, då lär man väl sig</td>
<td>Man lär sig om man härmar efter en vuxen som pratar engelska</td>
<td>Man lär sig om man härmar efter en vuxen som pratar engelska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But if you repeat when they are speaking English, if it’s an adult who is speaking English and you repeat what they say after them, that’s like, then I guess you learn</td>
<td>You learn when you repeat after an adult who speaks English</td>
<td>You learn when you repeat after an adult who speaks English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The examples consist of original Swedish wording followed by translations in English.
said, for instance, *i ringen* ‘in the ring’ or *Cookiemonster var en utmaning* ‘the Cookiemonster was a challenge’. Agreement markers, for instance *mm* or *ja, jag vet* ‘yes, I know’ (which may or may not suggest actual agreement), were not coded.

In the next step, all codes were color-coded to a specific group discussion, cut apart on pieces of paper and tentatively sorted on a large table. Similar codes were grouped. This was a slow bottom-up iterative process of sorting and re-sorting, identifying similarities and differences, aiming to arrive at clear-cut categories that were internally inclusive and externally exclusive, in other words, where each category could easily be labeled to cover all the codes within it, and where no categories overlapped (Krippendorff, 2013; Patton, 2002). Some tentative categories were collapsed while others were separated and re-sorted. Photographs, mind-maps and log notes helped me monitor the process. While not initially focusing on the color-codes while sorting, these made it possible to shift my attention and review whether a certain tentative category originated from all or some groups. All codes were imported into nVivo and categorized further. As categories were found to overlap, new considerations and approaches were tested. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), as the data reflect human experiences, the subjective and interrelated nature of learners’ utterances is not easily sorted into clear-cut categories.

The aim of the analysis was to arrive at one plausible way of representing the empirical data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Guided by the objective of exploring and comparing beliefs and experiences among learners in one of the classrooms, codes were therefore sorted into subcategories under two major categories, labeled *beliefs* and *experiences* (see Table 4). As study III set out to investigate whether the findings in study II were relevant in other classrooms, the same categories were used to perform a deductive analysis in study III.

The category *beliefs* contains learners’ uttered assumptions about language learning, that is, what learners believed to be good approaches, what they expect from the teacher and what learners should do. In other words, general aspects of teaching and learning that benefitted language acquisition. The category named *experiences* focuses on the individual learners’ personal, subjective and contextual experiences and reactions — how aspects of lesson instruction played out for the individual learner. In other words, the category *beliefs* relates to general ideas of what is ideal, whereas the category *experiences* deals with actual practice and perceptions of what actually takes place (see examples for each subcategory in Table 4). The guiding line was
drawn at what appeared to be said referring to the general, or if learners were speaking about themselves. Codes were assigned to categories based on how learners expressed themselves, with the present interaction or the whole conversation as background.

Interpreting what the children said was a challenging part of the analytic procedure. Some learners expressed themselves in ways that were difficult to make sense of, for example: *ja, man förklarar ju sig för att härma vad andra säger* ‘well, yes, you explain yourself to copy what others are saying’ (in relation to repeating things after the teacher), or *om det står hur det stavas* ‘if the spelling is written’. Some expressions were rather vague, such as: *göra engelska* ‘do English’, *prata om engelska* ‘talk about English’, and it was uncertain whether these statements referred to explanations or metatalk, the language or the lessons? Elaborations or examples would have helped in the interpretation of *läraren hjälper oss försöka* ‘the teacher helps us try’, as it was not made clear whether this support was offered by the teacher modelling, guiding, or encouraging the learners using body language or speech. Furthermore, the wording in phrases such as *man lär av/jag tycker man lär av/jag lär av* ‘you learn from/I think you learn from/I learn from’ may have been chosen to convey a general belief, or a personal experience, refer to learners in general or the speaker in particular but may also simply echo phrases from a peer or a discussion prompt.

Other times, learners expressed opinions more implicitly and by the tone of voice. For example, a learner could talk about something the teacher used to do, implying this to be a good thing. In a few groups, the discussions at times had a humorous or ironic tone, which was most often obvious from the recordings. As discussed above, this is to be expected in a less formal conversation among peers and is a sign of the social and dialogic element of the interactions. It was however difficult to interpret whether they meant what they were saying or where to draw the line when they were simply exaggerating or joking. Segments that were judged to have crossed that line, and which were generally rather short, were disregarded.

Assigning codes to categories presented another challenge. Most importantly, beliefs and experiences are not easily separated, neither in theory, nor in practice. Beliefs impact learners’ interpretations and experiences, while learners also draw on personal experience to negotiate beliefs. Utterances that involved a general *man* ‘you/one’ were generally categorized as a belief, whereas a statement formulated as *jag lär mig bäst av* ‘I learn best from’ were most often categorized as an experience, especially when the learner mentioned a specific situation. Sometimes the speaker would stress the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories and subcategories</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Examples of codes in Swedish</th>
<th>Examples of codes translated into English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals (115)</td>
<td>Beliefs about the purpose of learning</td>
<td>Viktigt kunna kommunicera med folk</td>
<td>Important be able to communicate with people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Man vill kunna lite engelska, förstå vad andra säger</td>
<td>You want to know some English, understand what others are saying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Man måste kunna be om hjälp utomlands</td>
<td>You must be able to ask for help abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Viktigast är uttal, så det inte blir ett annat ord</td>
<td>Pronunciation most important, so it's not another word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language learning (203)</td>
<td>Beliefs about target language use and interaction</td>
<td>Bra när läraren pratar engelska, man får gissa, tänka på ord som liknar</td>
<td>TL use good, you get to guess, think of similar words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Om man lyssnar förstår man instruktioner till slut</td>
<td>If you listen you eventually understand instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alla lärare borde översätta</td>
<td>All teachers should translate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Det är inte farligt att säga fel</td>
<td>Making mistakes is not dangerous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson content (270)</td>
<td>Beliefs about oral activities and lesson organization</td>
<td>Man lär bäst när man lyssnar</td>
<td>You learn best when you listen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bästa sätt att försöka tala med andra</td>
<td>Trying to speak to others is the best way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rita är slöseri med tid</td>
<td>Drawing is a waste of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Man lär sig mer när man säger efter</td>
<td>You learn more when you repeat after someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles (220)</td>
<td>Beliefs about the role of the teacher and the learners</td>
<td>Attitudes and opinions (122)</td>
<td>Experiences of interacting, lessons and work mode (286)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lärarens ansvar att man får tillräcklig tid att öva</td>
<td>Engelska är roligt</td>
<td>Pinsamt säga fel ibland</td>
<td>Embarrassing to make mistakes sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man lär av att fröken pratar om vardagliga saker</td>
<td>Jag hatar engelska</td>
<td>Jag frågar inte, blir nervös</td>
<td>I don’t ask, get nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man ska i alla fall försöka lära sig</td>
<td>Jag lär mig ingen engelska i skolan</td>
<td>Jag kan bli trött, titta bort, inte orka med</td>
<td>I can get tired, look away, not have the energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viktigt att inte ge upp när det är svårt</td>
<td>Roligare göra sånt man kan</td>
<td>Rutiner och repetitioner hjälper</td>
<td>Routines and recaps help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher’s responsibility that you get enough time to practice</td>
<td>English is fun</td>
<td>I speak English almost fluently</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You learn from having the teacher talk about everyday topics</td>
<td>I hate English</td>
<td>I understand but my memory is bad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You should at least try to learn</td>
<td>I don’t learn any English in school</td>
<td>My dad and I are not good at English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important not to give up when it’s difficult</td>
<td>More fun to do things you know</td>
<td>I improve each day</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The number of codes in each subcategory is added in parentheses.*
personal pronoun, interpreted to underscore a conclusion drawn from personal experience that may not be true for others.

Ideally, meaning units are meant to capture one single idea. However, some utterances (15%) conveyed a causal relationship, for example *det är bra med mycket engelska bra för man får gissa* ‘a lot of English is good cause then you get to guess’, or *det känns bra att tala eng för då lär man mycket* ‘it feels good to speak English cause then you learn a lot’. Other utterances contained a tension; *engelska är lite svårt men ändå roligt* ‘English is a bit difficult but still fun’ or *jag fattar varför läraren talar engelska men ibland förstå jag inget* ‘I get why the teacher speaks English but sometimes I don’t understand anything’. Utterances could also involve progression: *först lär man av att lyssna, och sen av att prata* ‘first you learn from listening, and then from speaking’. Separating such meaning units into two codes, this tension or connections would be lost. Therefore, these utterances were kept intact as single codes, which appeared in two categories. Other times learners’ beliefs appeared to be based on their own personal experiences: *man lär sig av att prata i grupper så man blir mindre stressad, hinner tänka* ‘you learn from talking in groups so you don’t get as stressed, have time to think’ or *det är bra att chansa, det brukar bli rätt ibland* ‘guessing is good, sometimes you get it right’. These were also coded to belong to dual categories, in order not to lose the connection between a personal experience that appeared to inform a more general belief.

The categories generated could have been constructed differently. However, I believe the analytical process itself was more important than the final categorization. It was through the slow, ongoing iterative process of striving to arrive at clear distinct categories, that the tensions and mismatches among the frequently anxious learners became clear. The mismatches identified within the meaning units were sometimes apparent when looking at different sections of the transcriptions, but other times within a brief interaction or even a single utterance.

The findings that were generated by these methods and analyses are presented in the next chapter.
7. Findings in studies I–III

The three studies together constitute a mixed methods project, where each study generated insights and new questions that fed into the next, illustrating the inductive nature of the research process. The first study offered a quantitative overview of FLA in ten classrooms. The second study went on to investigate beliefs and experiences among learners of varying anxiety levels in the same classroom, whereas the third study focused on learners with similar levels of FLA but in varying classroom contexts. The findings can thus be triangulated and considered together, to further illustrate the experiences of YLLs.

Table 5 offers an overview of the classroom contexts involved, with the 225 learners who completed the questionnaire forming the bases of study I. The table also reveals the educational background of the teachers and an approximation of the amount of English spoken by them.

The first sections of the chapter are summaries of each of the three studies. Then, bringing together all the three studies, the aggregated findings about FLA, in relation age, contextual variables and proficiency, that were beyond the scope of the published articles, are discussed. Given that the methods of data collection used in this thesis do not replicate those in other studies, a final section is devoted to methodological reflections.

7.1 Summary study I

The first study investigated the prevalence of FLA in ten primary school classrooms in Sweden, with 225 learners aged 8–12, and identified specific situations and lesson elements that prompt negative reactions.

To compare and contrast the responses of learners reporting different levels of FLA, students were assigned to a low-, a medium-, or a high-anxiety group. The label high-anxiety learners was used following the conventions in the field (although the strongly agree response option in the original FLCAS may convey either how often or how intensely participants experience FLA). In
### Table 5

**Overview of the ten classrooms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School year</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4/5&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>4/5&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>8–9</td>
<td>9–10</td>
<td>9–10</td>
<td>10–11</td>
<td>10–11</td>
<td>10–12</td>
<td>10–12</td>
<td>11–12</td>
<td>11–12</td>
<td>11–12</td>
<td>8–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants study I</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants study II</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants study III</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group codes in study III</strong></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher education&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</strong></td>
<td>GT</td>
<td>GT</td>
<td>GT</td>
<td>LT</td>
<td>GT</td>
<td>GT</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>LT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher’s language use&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</strong></td>
<td>Mostly L1</td>
<td>L1/TL</td>
<td>TL only</td>
<td>L1/TL</td>
<td>Mostly TL</td>
<td>TL only</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Mostly TL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

<sup>a</sup> The questionnaire was administered at the end of year 4 while group discussions were conducted early in year 5.

<sup>b</sup> GT = generalist teacher; LT = language teacher. Classrooms F and G were taught by the same teacher, as were classrooms H, I and J.

<sup>c</sup> L1 = first language, Swedish; TL = target language, English
the case of the current thesis, response options referred to frequency. Therefore, *frequently anxious* learners is, arguably, a more appropriate term. These frequently anxious learners had total questionnaire scores at least 1 SD above the mean in the whole group. According to their mean scores, they experienced FLA *often/almost always/always* during lesson activities involving oral interaction. Of all learners, 18% belonged to this frequently anxious group, and for a large majority of them, their anxiety appeared to be situation-specific, as they reported feeling more anxious during English lessons than in lessons in other school subject.

Frequently anxious learners were unevenly distributed across classrooms (ranging between 4% and 38%) as illustrated in Figure 2 Nilsson, 2019, p. 10). FLA was spread among age groups, across and within classrooms, with only one frequently anxious learner in some classrooms and eleven in another.

**Figure 2**

*Results from study I: Distribution of learners according to levels of FLA*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A (year 2)</th>
<th>B (year 3)</th>
<th>C (year 3)</th>
<th>D (year 4)</th>
<th>E (year 4)</th>
<th>F (year 4)</th>
<th>G (year 5)</th>
<th>H (year 5)</th>
<th>I (year 5)</th>
<th>J (year 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High anxiety</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium anxiety</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low anxiety</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Each bar represents a classroom according to the overview in Table 5.*

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10 The term *high-anxiety learners* is used in study I and II, whereas the same subgroup are referred to as *frequently anxious learners* in study III and in this extended summary.
However, it is important to point out that assigning learners to three different groups according to their total results hides the fact that they were spread along a continuum of anxiety levels. FLA is thus a matter of frequency rather than a dichotomy in these classrooms.

Across the three subgroups, learners’ reactions to specific common classroom practices converged, diverged and overlapped (as illustrated by the tables in Article I; Nilsson, 2019). Almost half of the YLLs reported occasionally feeling anxious about some aspect of English instruction. FLA was most clearly related to speaking and making mistakes. A closer look at the learners with recurrent FLA revealed very idiosyncratic profiles in relation to the seven questionnaire items and a great majority of them had marked responses across most of the 7-step Likert scale. In fact, all learners categorized as frequently anxious reported unique response profiles. The same anxiety score could thus represent a range of reactions to different situations. Nevertheless, a large majority of the learners with frequent FLA reported that English lessons invoked more nervousness than other school subjects, thus confirming their anxiety as situation-specific.

The results regarding levels of FLA and learners’ responses to different aspects of teaching are not themselves considered generalizable to other contexts. Therefore, no inferential statistical analysis was conducted and no correlations were calculated (as discussed in Section 6.4.1). Nevertheless, contextualized findings from learners with no previous language instruction and in favorable conditions, may generate a more nuanced understanding of emergent FLA. The study confirmed the heterogeneity among primary school learners as a group, suggesting that FLA may be prevalent in most classrooms, also in contexts with qualified teachers, a supportive atmosphere and without high-stakes testing. Moreover, the range of profiles points to the complex nature of FLA, and teaching YLLs. Consequently, teachers are advised to consider FLA as a contextual phenomenon rather than as an individual variable.

These findings served as a baseline for the following articles in the present research project. The study raised new questions about contextual factors and what young learners themselves believe about language learning, and how they understand and respond to language teaching. Do frequently anxious learners have different expectations and beliefs associated with language learning and teaching than their peers? Study II therefore set out to explore learner beliefs, using a more qualitative approach, in one of the classrooms.
7.2 Summary study II

Study II focused on learners in the one classroom with the highest levels of anxiety (classroom C in Table 5 and Figure 2), in order to investigate learners’ beliefs and experiences, and whether more and less anxious learners within the exact same context differed in this regard. The class teacher, according to her own account, and the observations, consistently abided to a TL-only approach.

The data from group discussions revealed rather consensual language learner beliefs across groups of varying experiences of FLA. Generally, they expressed beliefs about the benefits of the teachers’ exclusive use of English, although some pointed out the problems of sometimes not understanding. Interestingly, the frequently anxious learners articulated less such concerns than their more confident peers. These learners accepted the monolingual approach, although input, such as instructions and questions, was often incomprehensible to them. They did, however, worry about not being able to respond appropriately. They also feared making oral mistakes in the classroom and they were aware that this fear conflicted with their beliefs about how learners should behave in the classroom. Across discussion groups, learners voiced beliefs about the centrality of engaging, guessing and daring to speak English. For the frequently anxious learners, there was thus a tension between, on the one hand, the teacher’s approach and learners’ beliefs, and on the other hand, what learners described that they actually did, as their emotional reactions of stress and fear made them remain quiet. The learners with frequent FLA felt most comfortable in whole-class settings, where activities were guided by the teacher, where they did not risk falling behind and where the teacher could offer visual support. Ironically, this whole-class scenario was the situation in which they felt most nervous about speaking and which hindered them from actually participating orally.

The inductive QCA thus identified three mismatches based on the accounts of the frequently anxious YLLs in this classroom. The first related to language reception, where they, although they favored the TL only approached, felt that it hampered their understanding and interaction. The second mismatch centered on language production, as learners highlighted the importance of oral interaction, engaging and daring to speak, although they themselves did not dare to do so. The third mismatch referred to work mode, as the whole-class setting represented both a support and a threat.

Researchers in the field have suggested, based on studies from different global contexts with adult learners, that mismatches between teacher and
learner beliefs may induce FLA and that it is important to discuss teaching approaches and learner beliefs (Aragão, 2011; Kalaja et al., 2018). Interestingly, the teacher in study II did discuss the rationale behind an English-only policy, and the learners expressed strong support for the approach. However, as the monolingual teaching presented frequently anxious learners with difficulties understanding and performing, they blamed themselves and felt anxious.

A model was suggested that outlines how beliefs and emotions overlap to different degrees (see Figure 3; Nilsson, 2020a, p. 273). When beliefs and emotional experiences are in agreement, the overlap is large, and the learners feel able to act in accordance with their beliefs. However, as in the case of the frequently anxious learners, their expressed beliefs were in conflict with their experiences and social considerations that dominated their behavior and made them refrain from acting in agreement with those beliefs. Consequently, their sense of agency, representing the overlap, was reduced.

**Figure 3**

*Sense of agency as an overlap between beliefs and emotions.*

Study II was a case study of a single classroom, with many learners who frequently experienced FLA in their monolingual classroom. The anticipated differences in learner beliefs among learners of varying anxiety levels were not confirmed. Instead, the shared classroom beliefs were part of the inner mismatches that the learners with recurrent FLA accounted for. The study prompted new questions about how the findings would compare to the experience of frequently anxious learners in other classrooms, and whether similar mismatches could be found.
7.3 Summary study III

Study III went on to expand the scope of study II and to further explore mismatches among young Swedish learners of English. This time, the empirical data comprised ten group discussions among frequently anxious learners from seven classrooms, years 2–5, taught by six different teachers. In other words, instead of comparing learners with varying occurrences of experiencing FLA, the focus was on learners who were similar in this regard, as they frequently felt nervous or anxious about English, but who were used to a range of different teaching approaches, levels of TL use, and activities, as they belonged to different classrooms. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether the mismatches identified in the classroom in study II had bearing in other classrooms as well. Furthermore, the study addressed the impact of such mismatches on young frequently anxious learners’ sense of agency. Data were collected using the same activity as in study II. This time, a deductive analysis was performed to explore the beliefs and experiences of the 31 learners. The categories generated in study II were used, as these had been found fruitful to uncover mismatches, and also illuminated important dimensions of learners’ sense of agency. The findings revealed the same mismatches across these seven classrooms. In other words, although the number of frequently anxious learners varied among classrooms, the conflicting beliefs and experiences that these learners expressed were remarkably similar. As TL use varied among the teachers in the seven classrooms, these learners had different experiences of the balance between English and Swedish. Nevertheless, frequently anxious learners echoed the same beliefs about the benefits of extensive TL input, but also the frustration that was triggered in cases when they did not grasp prompts and instructions. For most of these learners, group discussions implied that asking for clarifications or admitting to not understanding were not regarded as options. Instead, they relied on visual support in their books or observing their peers. Those who were used to support in the L1 confirmed that this was a relief, whereas some other learners called for more L1 support. As for their own oral

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11 Although there were frequently anxious learners in all ten classrooms, the study was based on empirical data only from groups where the mean questionnaire score exceeded the threshold for frequent anxiety, (as discussed in Section 6.2.3). Two classrooms (classrooms I and J in Table 5 and Figure 2) did not have any such groups.

12 All the participants in the ten classrooms took part in group discussions, although study III was based on data from ten such discussions. This will be addressed further in Section 8.5.
production, the group discussions mirrored the concerns from study II; frequently anxious learners voiced rational beliefs about the importance of speaking up, boosting self-confidence and that making mistakes is a natural part of language learning. However, for fear of embarrassment and negative attention, it was difficult to act according to this ideal. As regards work mode, the learners with frequent FLA relied on their teachers to scaffold, support and model. Individual work was associated with stress and the risk of falling behind and not receiving help from the teacher. Many of them were positive about group work, and some suggested that this was a good stepping stone to prepare for oral activities in whole-class mode.

The discussion prompts, centering on beliefs and experiences, confirmed the role of emotion in early classroom instruction and highlighted the situated nature of learners’ sense of agency. Not only did FLA hamper learners’ engagement, but the inability to act in a manner consistent with language learner beliefs was detrimental to their sense of agency. The model from study II (Figure 3) thus serves to visualize the interaction between beliefs, emotions and sense of agency in this study as well. Hence, the goal of enhancing young learners’ sense of agency may be thought of in terms of creating situations where contextual affordances scaffold and empower learners to engage and make choices in alignment with their language learner beliefs. Furthermore, considering that the mismatches from the previous case study were confirmed among frequently anxious learners across seven other classrooms, these findings may be transferable to primary school contexts in Sweden.

The dialogic nature of young learners’ meaning-making was evident, as they faced the task of responding to complex questions related to teaching and learning. In accordance with a dialogical perspective, the group discussions were not simply a display or collection of individual contributions and utterances that represented already established thoughts. Instead, the discussions constituted cognitive construction sites (Dufva, 2003) where learners most often needed time to tentatively formulate suggestions, negotiate and explore the issues together. Furthermore, the discussions reflect the double dialogicality at play (Linell, 2009), as learners made contributions building on their own personal histories, emotions and perceptions, striving to arrive at mutual understandings and generalizable abstract beliefs in relation to their situated classroom perspectives.
7.4 Variables related to FLA in studies I–III

Altogether, the findings revealed both the heterogeneous and the homogeneous nature of learner experiences, even among those learners with recurrent negative emotions (although in summaries like the ones above, such diversity is lost). Learners in the frequently anxious groups in study I, were all unique in their responses. Asked to discuss beliefs in relation to language teaching and learning, in studies II and III, they shared personal understandings and experiences, recollection and incidents from their respective classrooms. Like their classmates, they appeared well motivated to learn English. Yet, they verbalized feelings of embarrassment, fear, worry, nervousness and even panic. Comparing the findings, where experiences of FLA link the studies together, issues of age, the impact of the teacher, TL input and proficiency on FLA will be accounted for below. Then, the following section will provide methodological reflections, before moving on to the next chapter, where the research questions will be addressed, and the overall findings and implications will be discussed.

With regards to age, year 2 had the highest proportion of learners centered in the middle group, with sporadic FLA. The most recurrent FLA was found in the year 3 group in study II, whereas one of the year 4 classrooms reported the lowest levels. The findings thus suggest support for the claim based on previous research that although FLA in general has been found to increase from the age of 10–11 to teenage years, contextual factors and experience rather than age affects the actual of levels of FLA. For example, in year 2, in their third semester of primary school, learners did not have much experience of English instruction, and oral participation in whole class was completely optional. As FLA is thought to emerge in a cycle of negative experiences and expectations, such negative circular development had, hypothetically, not been established. In the rest of the groups, the degree to which learners were called on to speak in class, may have affected FLA. In the year 4 group with the lowest FLA, the group had recently started to work with a new material that recapped topics and phrases that had already been covered in year 3. This may have contributed to mitigate FLA. Furthermore, as learners progress towards year 6, with national tests and grades, and a closer focus on academic achievement, this may very well increase FLA. Older learners also have more experiences of classroom instruction but also, in general, of using English in their free time and travels abroad. This may impact both their beliefs and their FLA. It is however likely that these experiences, in and out of school, rather
than their biological age, are relevant for FLA, although the two variables are obviously connected.

Although the questionnaire results revealed great variation across classrooms, no straightforward conclusions about the impact of the teacher or the teaching approach can be drawn. The teacher is of paramount importance in the primary classroom. The group discussions revealed how especially frequently anxious learners relied on their teachers to lead and guide them, model, explain and offer feedback, important both for learning but also as emotional support. Two groups in year 4 taught by the same teacher, reported rather similar questionnaire results, including the highest levels of FLA. Yet, in the case of the three classrooms in year 5, these were taught by the same teacher, who used the same activities and approaches, although reporting very differing levels. Hence, the impact of the teacher does not seem straightforward. It may suggest a strong impact of the social dynamics within a group, and possibly, that there is a contagious dimension of FLA (cf., Pekrun, 2014; Skinnari, 2014).

The challenges of being exposed to exclusive or extensive TL input did not appear to be a primary trigger of FLA in young learners, according to the questionnaire. Again, the majority of learners, in all the classrooms, reported no, rare or occasional FLA. However, TL use is the only contextual variable that appeared saliently related to FLA across these ten classrooms. A majority of the learners who most frequently experienced FLA belonged to the three classrooms with the highest amounts of TL use. Furthermore, TL use is not only a matter of quantity, but also of how language is used and adapted. It is possible that the TL-only approach in study II, in year 3, triggered more FLA than with learners who have studied English for a longer period of time simply because the teacher, who spoke fluently, aimed to present learners with authentic input by not simplifying too much.

The qualitative studies offered further insight into the matter of TL exposure. Across classrooms, learners expressed great consensus about the importance of English as the dominant classroom language. Although this may be challenging, and even incomprehensible, learners got used to the language, learned words and developed communicative strategies, such as guessing and making use of visual aids. In general, however, learners refrained from asking for clarifications, especially those who frequently felt anxious. Instead, they hoped for some explanations in the L1, depending on the classroom they were in, or simply preferred to wait and observe the others. The findings revealed that FLA peaked in relation to speaking in front of the group. Most often, incomprehensible input *per se* did not generate negative
emotion. There was, however, an indirect causal link between TL use and FLA. The TL was an obstacle when it restricted learners’ ability to grasp prompts and instructions, that further increased the risk of social exposure, as learners worried that they might have misunderstood, or failed to understand, what they were expected to do or respond to.

Based on the data in this thesis, nothing can be said about the language proficiency among the learners and within classrooms. Among the frequently anxious learners there were those who found it frustrating to be expected to speak when *man inte kan* ‘you don’t know’, but also that English lessons were boring, since the teaching revolved around *att lära sig saker man redan kan* ‘learning things you already know’. Therefore, proficiency per se does not seem to be the issue. As pointed out by Mihaljević Djigunović (2009), FLA generally increases with age during primary school, along with language proficiency. Instead, individual proficiency level in relation to that in the group as a whole, appears to be important, and is thus another contextual rather than individual variable.

In sum, findings revealed that these learners, in similar macro level educational conditions but in different classrooms, and with different teachers, voiced similar beliefs, and although the levels of FLA differed, the triggers of FLA and the mismatches identified were the same.

7.5 Reflections on the methodology of the research project

The observations served for familiarizing with the different classroom contexts and offered necessary background data when designing the group discussions.

Initially, it was surprising to note that the self-consciousness and fear that more anxious learners felt in relation to making mistakes in front of their classmates, which were highlighted in the group discussions, did not reflect the responses in the questionnaire. The results for the item that read *Jag är rädd att de andra ska fnissa åt mig eller reta mig när jag pratar engelska* ‘I

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13 As described in Section 1.3, no such individual data were collected, as it was beyond the focus of the project. Furthermore, it was reasonable to assume that data collection that included measures of proficiency would have decreased the willingness to participate on part of some learners and parents/caregivers.
am afraid the others will giggle or tease me when I speak English’\textsuperscript{14}, did not confirm this to be an issue. In the discussions, many learners pointed out that the situation was a false fear – in their experience peers did not laugh or giggle, although the risk of this happening still inhibited them from speaking. It thus seemed to be the mere thought of this hypothetical scenario that evoked FLA. This situation thus made it difficult to respond to the questionnaire item, as it may be conceived to contain two questions in one, about perceptions and feelings on the one hand and actual conditions on the other: Do learners in this class sometimes laugh at mistakes that classmates make? Are you nervous about the possibility of receiving negative comments or reactions from peers, although this may not actually happen? Conceivably, learners felt that confirming high levels of anxiety for this item would not be correct, as it would convey to me that this happened in their classroom. This situation highlights the importance of carefully worded items that do not involve two questions in one. As learners responded that this was not a major concern to them although it in fact was, a question phrased differently, targeting the false fear, would have generated even higher FLA scores.

Some learners added unsolicited comments on the questionnaire that further complexified the results. For example, one questionnaire item referred to learners’ willingness to volunteer answers, as one of the dimensions in the operationalization of FLA. Yet, in one case, a learner reported very low levels of FLA for all the items except this one, but had added in the margin that he did not bother to raise his hand, out of boredom. A number of other learners appeared to have emphasized specific answers by circling their chosen response several times in thick pencil strokes. These responses were treated the same way as all the others, but it suggests that learners felt an urge to communicate beyond circles on a response sheet. Allowing learners to add comments to questionnaire items may thus reveal interesting aspects that the researcher has failed to consider.

The more open group discussions revealed the dialogic nature of learners’ meaning-making and interaction. Overall, learners found the activity engaging and many groups did not have time to answer all questions. Learners often agreed, strived for consensus and supported each other. At times they questioned each other or reminded a classmate that they had drifted off topic. Group dynamics of course differed vastly. More quiet learners were often

\textsuperscript{14} This is a modified version of the FLCAS item ‘I am afraid other students will laugh at me when I speak the foreign language’.
invited by the peers to speak, while learners in other constellations interrupted each other. Some triads shared speaking time most diligently, inviting peers to speak, while others fought a little for talk time. Learners sometimes found it challenging to explain what they meant. This was not surprising, both because they were confronted with questions that they were not used to talking about, but also since these topics were quite abstract. Negotiating and trying to express themselves some of the learners would add fattar ni vad jag menar? ‘you know what I mean?’ and their partners would most often confirm that they did. In many cases, it seemed as though they may have agreed simply to be supportive. Other times it appeared to be a way of taking over the speaking turn.

In contrast to the importance of carefully considering the wording of questionnaire items, the exact formulations of discussions prompts appeared to matter less. Learners spoke about them in different order and spent different amounts of time on each question. Each individual contribution could lead the conversation in a certain direction, and in fact, each of the prompts used, generated codes for each of the categories developed.

Several notable considerations in relation to the group discussion setup deserve to be addressed. On the positive side, the learners covered a range of topics and shared associations and experiences. Some groups discussed certain aspects in more depth while other touched briefly on a range of associated topics. Yet, the group discussion data cannot be considered in-depth explorations, nor is this a realistic expectation when presenting YLLs with new and abstract topics. On the negative side, the activity was rather brief, and many learners would have liked to elaborate more on their answers. Nevertheless, the possibility of conducting each activity within one lesson facilitated access to learners and classrooms. The absence of an adult during the group discussion is thought both to increase and decrease the quality of the data. The drawbacks involve not being able to ask for explanations and further elaborations; some of the utterances were difficult for me to understand. Furthermore, any negative group dynamic effects went unnoticed. In addition, the less formal atmosphere, and also aspects like the time of day and the group constellations, led some learners or groups to deal with the activity in a less serious manner at times, not concentrating fully or fiddling with objects nearby. Recordings included episodes where learners made jokes, exaggerated, pretended to be someone else and so forth (although this was more frequent in the group discussions that were not analyzed). These learners’ agenda may have been to amuse their peers rather than to respond seriously, or simply to resist participation. All this is of course a perfectly
typical situation within a primary classroom, while it may, in relation to data collection be considered “off-task”. Where to draw the line on what to include in the analysis was challenging and had to be carefully considered in each case.

Interestingly, the advantages of the group discussion design concern these same aspects. The familiar and informal setting allowed learners to engage without the intervention of an adult researcher, which increased ecological validity and facilitated dialogic interaction. The group dynamics may have had both positive and negative consequences for individual learners, encouraging or inhibiting them from sharing their thoughts, and possibly adapting to peers for reasons of social desirability (Agar et al., 2005). While this may have had negative effects on the quality of the data, it suggests that learners did not attempt to adapt to the expectations of the adult researcher who would listen to the recordings. In sum, this setup affected the quality of the data in ways that are difficult to assess, and where benefits and drawbacks may be considered two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, these disadvantages were reasonably balanced by the rich data that were gathered.

The methods of data collection, namely the questionnaire and the group discussion activity, which were developed for this context and purpose of the studies, were received well by the YLLs and generated valuable data while being brief enough to be conducted with many participants in one lesson. As I expected, most learners seemed quite interested in learning more about research, and in being invited to participate. In the pilot classrooms, learners were asked to write a brief note evaluating the group discussion activity in their own words. These suggested that learners found it fun, rewarding and interesting to share their beliefs with their peers. Some wrote that it had been a bit ovanligt ‘unusual’ or konstigt ‘odd’, although interesting and important, with nödvändiga frågor ‘necessary questions’. A few confirmed that they had found it fascinating to learn about what their classmates thought and be able to share their experiences. One learner commented that the group setting was favorable: Om man inte visste kanske någon annan hade nät att säga, ‘If you didn’t know, maybe someone else had something to say’.

The amount and the quality of the data impact what Malterud et al. (2016) call the information power in the sample. The way in which learners were addressed, the careful explanations of the purpose and the instructions, and enough time to complete the activities, are likely to have contributed to the information power, since learners in general took their participation seriously and were eager to participate. As for the questionnaire, the brevity reduced the information power, while offering seven response options increased the
nuances for each item. Inviting as many as 225 learners in the initial study made it possible to identify a sizeable number of 41 learners who frequently experienced the phenomenon in focus, namely FLA, reinforced the information power in the study I, but also the following studies, which could then focus on learners with frequent experiences of FLA from across different classroom contexts.

This chapter has reviewed the three studies in the research project, and considered aspects related to FLA in the present context, as well as methodological issues with respect to the new approaches in data collection. The following chapter will discuss the broader implications of the findings, and address the overarching research questions.
The current thesis set out to explore the perspectives of language learners in years 2–5, aged 8–12, in Swedish primary classrooms. With a specific interest in the nature of FLA and how to counteract negative emotion and foster a sense of agency in foreign language classroom, this final chapter discusses the experiences and beliefs of YLLs, grounded in the findings of the three studies. The overarching research questions, as stated in Section 1.3, are centered on learners’ experiences and how their perspectives align with current research topics in the field. Informed by the accounts of the young participants, theoretical and practical conclusions and implications are addressed. Limitations of the study and avenues for future research conclude the chapter.

8.1 FLA, beliefs and agency in the primary English classroom

The studies shed light on the impact of emotion on the cognitive and social processes involved in language education. As almost one of five learners frequently experienced FLA in the present context, the findings add further weight to those of previous studies, in other contexts, that not all YLLs by default feel confident about communicating in a new language. Spread along a continuum, many of these learners reported some sort of negative emotion in relation to classroom interactions on a regular basis. Speaking made them most uncomfortable, echoing findings from other educational settings, which found speaking and making mistakes to be what learners in general fear the most (Chan & Wu, 2004; Gürsoy & Akin, 2013; Liu & Chen, 2014; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). Furthermore, the findings in the present studies mirror those found among adults, reflecting similar experiences (Gkonou, 2014, 2015, 2017), as well as contextual and social considerations related to FLA (e.g., Yoshida, 2013a, 2013b). In the group discussions, intended to focus on learner beliefs, the emotional dimensions were brought to the fore as central to classroom instruction for YLLs, and are thus crucial to inform a deeper understanding of how learners perceive and respond to language
teaching, as recognized by Kuchah and Pinter (2012). These YLLs were aware of both the affective and cognitive aspects at play in situations where they felt socially exposed, highlighting how they needed to cope with their emotions but also the risks of negative impact on their memory and ability to focus. Hence, the accounts of these young learners themselves illustrate the vicious cycle of FLA, referred to by MacIntyre (2017), and the competing rational and emotional considerations involved.

The findings suggest that FLA is not associated with certain language learner beliefs. The more anxious learners do not hold beliefs different to those of the less anxious classmates. On the contrary, their ideas of principles that should guide language learning and teaching are the same as those of their peers and their teachers, in alignment with the policy documents and syllabus for English that are underpinned with a CLT approach. In general, these YLLs conveyed a functional and communicative conception of English, which they shared with their teachers. Previous studies suggest that beliefs of primary school learners are appropriated by authoritative adults, but also that they develop along with increasing personal experience (Aro, 2009, 2016a; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2015). Arguably, appropriation is a form of experience, although more indirect, where learners have received input about language and language learning from their parents, other adults and society at large. The teacher unavoidably conveys beliefs to learners through their teaching. Especially in cases where these are explicitly and rationally elaborated on, it is not surprising that these beliefs have powerful impact on YLLs, and become part of their own belief system. The importance of positive thinking, daring and engaging is a recurrent topic across classrooms and levels of FLA. It is also possible that teachers have stressed these ideals more explicitly to hesitant or anxious learners than to their classmates, in attempts to encourage them to engage. At times, these beliefs appeared to be repeated among participants in order to reinforce and boost confidence in themselves and their classmates.

Yet, the frequently anxious learners offered powerful accounts of the conflicts between their beliefs and their own behavior, which are guided by the desire to avoid social exposure and embarrassment. These mismatches thus have cognitive, social and emotional dimensions. When learners’ ideals and expectations do not align with their own affective experiences in the social setting, it seems that they accommodate this discrepancy by maintaining their learner beliefs but modifying their beliefs and perceptions related to the self, their own action potential and their volition to engage. Frequently anxious learners, who feel unable to act in accordance with their own ideals and beliefs
about how they ought to dare to speak and not worry about making mistakes, therefore blame themselves. This weakened sense of agency was apparent in data, as some learners spoke of themselves as cowardly and less able learners who choose to remain quiet.

Studies with adults have concluded that situations where the beliefs and approach of the teacher conflict with the expectations and beliefs of the students are a source of frustration and avoidance behavior on part of the learners (Brown, 2009). Conceivably, such competing beliefs are not very probable in the case of YLLs in Sweden; learners do not bring previous experiences of language teaching to the primary classroom and their primary English teacher is likely to be perceived as an influential language learning expert. As discussed in Article II (Nilsson, 2020a), the mismatches identified in the thesis may in fact be aggravated by the teachers’ expressed beliefs, that learners may perceive as unchallenged truths. The dissonance is not to be found between the teacher and the learner but instead within the individual learners.

The Vygotskyan concept *perezhivanie*, that brings together cognitive, social and affective dimensions of meaning-making, helps explain the great variety of emotional and behavioral responses to language instruction within a single classroom. The individual learners’ perceptions of affordances and social context are interpreted and considered from the perspective of their subjective lived experience, or, as described by Vygotsky, refracted through their *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1994, p.340). Similarly, the integrated sociocognitive concept *mindbodyworld* reflects the entangled nature of cognitive, emotional and social aspects of classroom interaction that are illuminated in the learner accounts. The dialogic group interactions serve to highlight the social dimensions not only of learning, but also of the formation of beliefs, understandings and assumptions that take shape among learners within the same context. At the same time, the YLLs referred to personal recollections, reactions and emotional responses. Learners’ sense of agency is situated in the present context, and precedes agentic choices and actions. It depends on their past experiences, especially those infused with strong emotion, and thus influences the way they make sense of and act in relation to their context. Situational and individual characteristics, both intellectual and affective, thus clearly interact, suggesting a close link between *perezhivanie* and a dialogically-informed understanding of agency, as lived and felt (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004). In the suggested model in Section 7.2 (Figure 3), both the beliefs and the emotions are refracted through learners’ unique and personal *perezhivanie*, overlapping in a sense of agency. Within the thesis
project, the diversity of beliefs, perceptions and experiences among all the learners who participated cannot be done justice, nor was this the intention. Nevertheless, acknowledging the impact of perezhivanie, the unique experiences and subjective perspectives on classroom life of each learner, is important.

To reach a deeper understanding of FLA in primary school, and to illustrate its social and contextual nature, the studies that form part of this thesis focus mostly on the voices of learners with frequent FLA. The purpose is not to fixate on specific learners, but instead to direct attention to their thoughts, experiences and beliefs associated with FLA and English teaching. I do realize that categorizing learners according to FLA, and using the term frequently anxious learners, is problematic, and risks conveying the idea that FLA is relevant for a specific group of learners, and not their peers. This is not the intention. Identifying learners with frequent experiences of FLA, and foregrounding their voices, is meant to illustrate dimensions of the concept as seen through a young learner perspective.

At the same time, although the discussion group questions prompted diverse and personal understandings, recollections and incidents where learners associated and related to the routines and practices in their respective classrooms, there are strong commonalities in the accounts of the frequently anxious learners. These YLLs themselves noticed and confirmed this in their interactions as well as in informal and individual evaluations after the group discussion activity. This offers further support to previous claims about the unique yet also shared nature of learner experiences (Aro, 2009; Dufva, 2003).

Studying learners at early stages of foreign language instruction within the same classroom sheds light on conditions that interact with personal and subjective characteristics of each individual learner. There were learners reporting frequent as well as minimal FLA, in all classrooms. Occurrences of these negative emotions varied more within classrooms than between them. No conclusions can be drawn that explain the varying emotional responses.

However, and more importantly, the findings support the need to view FLA in a balanced way, where individual as well as contextual factors are interrelated. The studies suggest that language learning among peers triggers varying degrees of worry and nervousness in many YLLs. On the one hand, it is important to be aware of and interested in the needs and experiences of individual learners. On the other hand, it is advisable for teachers, as pointed out by Pekrun (2014), not to categorize learners as anxious or non-anxious. Instead, regarding FLA as a classroom phenomenon rather than an individual variable is a more constructive stance. Firstly, the findings point to a strong
impact of contextual and social factors on FLA. Secondly, as concluded in study I, instances of FLA were common beyond the group that was here referred to as frequently anxious learners. Thirdly, teachers cannot change their learners, but they can consider aspects of classroom work that may trigger FLA in some learners.

The prevalence of FLA and mismatches in these primary classrooms is troublesome for several reasons. To start with, it is a precarious situation for the individual child, and thus a concern for all teachers. The Swedish curriculum mandates a holistic consideration of each learner and the goal of fostering confidence, agency and self-expression. FLA, which may arguably be conceptualized as counterproductive to such aspirations, is problematic in the beginner language classroom context and may also have long-term negative effects on attitudes and motivation (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). Furthermore, the experiences of anxious learners interfere with language learning. Coping with negative emotions impacts cognitive processing, strategy use, decision making and attention (Pekrun, 2014). The group discussion data revealed how YLLs themselves perceived consequences of FLA, as it interfered with their memory and their focus. A view of learning that acknowledges affective dimensions, may, as suggested by Mahn and John-Steiner (2002), be necessary to fully grasp the concept of the ZPD within the context of formal language education. The cognitive development supported in the social interaction with a more knowledgeable peer also hinges on contextual experiences, in both the past and the present. A task slightly beyond one’s comfort zone may trigger motivation and a sense of agency, or frustration. Each such instance is likely to impact the response to future challenges. Furthermore, apart from the interactional process of scaffolding and teaching usually associated with the ZPD, other social dimensions are at play in a classroom context where learners are surrounded by peers.

The findings in studies I-III all reveal aspects of English lessons that young learners find challenging to deal with. Noticeably, these align with the main concerns of primary foreign language teachers in their professional practices around the world, namely how to make YLLs participate in oral language practice, and how to cater to the different needs and heterogeneous proficiency levels in their classrooms (Copland et al., 2014). Teachers striving to engage young beginner learners with meaningful interaction in the target language face an intricate task, considering learners’ more limited attention span and language proficiency. Teachers are well aware of the high stakes involved in whole-class interaction, as any unsuccessful attempt to prompt or entice hesitant learners to speak may intimidate learners and consolidate FLA.
In sum, the findings add to the growing body of research on young learners, by illuminating their experiences of language instruction. Their perspectives are essential in order to advance our understanding of the nature and development of FLA and sense of agency. Furthermore, these frequently anxious young learners illustrate how they navigate according to their lived experiences and the current situation, and that mismatches between learner beliefs and actual experiences of classroom interaction are problematic for them. Their accounts tell us that instruction needs to be attentive to situations where learners feel unprepared and exposed in front of a whole class. Grounded in the awareness of the strong impact of each learners’ perezhivanie, the thesis suggests a constructive stance, shifting the focus from FLA as an individual variable, to FLA as a classroom phenomenon and the question of how to counteract it, as many young learners will feel anxious about something. In safe learning conditions where the threshold for engagement can be lowered, there may be a lot to gain in the primary language classroom, for all learners. The discussion will therefore move on to consider the findings in relation to contemporary research discussions in EYL.

8.2 CLT informed by young learners’ perspectives

The mismatches identified among frequently anxious learners involved three aspects of classroom work, namely the teachers’ TL use, speaking in the classroom and work mode. The accounts of the most anxious learners in these contexts can be read as explicit and implicit recommendations for teachers aiming to counteract FLA and have bearing on issues such as TL use and TBLT. The following sections will therefore discuss the ways in which the concerns of YLLs, particularly those with recurrent FLA, can be tied to and complement these current research topics related to CLT for this age group.

In general, the language learner beliefs voiced in the classrooms harmonize with CLT and a dialogic view of language as a social action rather than an object of study. These YLLs have a practical goal with their language studies and want to master social situations. The motivation to learn English and use it abroad and online, in the future but also in the present, appears to be high. Learners expect English to dominate classroom talk and for the teacher to be a linguistic role model and challenge them with input that will make them guess and use listening strategies. Some children advocate the use of brief introductions, or recaps, in the L1. They tolerate not understanding everything they hear and believe it will help them learn in the long run.
However, for many, frustration sets in when they are expected to respond to incomprehensible input, in other words, when the teacher says something in English which is a prompt to speak, a question directed at them or a procedural instruction that they do not grasp. Although unintended, in a monolingual English classroom where the teacher controls and dominates the medium of interaction, lessons become less learner-centered. This may accentuate the gap between the teacher’s and the learners’ mastery of language, which may in itself have an inhibiting effect. Furthermore, as perceived low competence among learners has been found to correlate with FLA (Liu & Chen, 2013) it is possible that a general high proficiency level in a classroom increases FLA in individual learners, who judge their own proficiency to be low compared to that of their peers. At the same time, a teacher who perceives the overall proficiency within a group to be high may be imagined to choose to use the TL even more, which may further aggravate negative emotion in frequently anxious learners. As highlighted by Macaro and Lee (2013), “TL only might paradoxically make an English classroom less communicative by virtue of making some learners less willing to communicate in the L2” (p. 737). Yet, again, as discussed in Section 7.4, the question is also how the TL is used and adapted. Even so, judicious use of the L1 as a pedagogical resource may be advisable to facilitate communication on part of both the teacher and the learners. These YLLs appear in favor of what Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2014) advise teacher to aim for, which is optimal instead of exclusive TL use. Of course, the situation will be different in classrooms with many varying L1s that the teacher does not master. The central issue is, nevertheless, to find strategies to allow for and encourage all learners to access their diverse linguistic resources as cognitive tools to support learning and confirm understanding in the TL.

The other frequent strand in current research in EYL is TBLT. Although these learners were used to activities that centered on meaning, rather than form, tasks involving pair or group work with a clear objective and where learners had to make use of strategies to exchange information (following the definition by R. Ellis, 2009) were not very common, according to the observations and the group discussions. In cases where pair-work activities were repeated, the purpose was most often to allow learners to correct their own work. It seems, however, that the use of well-adapted, scaffolded pair-work tasks repeated several times is a fruitful way accommodating what the frequently anxious learners in the present context are calling for, that is, the opportunity for plenty of time to practice speaking in safe conditions. To begin with, pair or group work increases actual talk time for all learners in the
classroom and reduces the face-threatening situation of speaking to the whole group, which arguable does not constitute a very common situation for TL use outside the classroom, and is not a goal or a requirement in the syllabus. FLA in the current classrooms was often closely related to the risk of making mistakes in the larger social setting of the whole group.

Furthermore, task repetition, as evidenced by previous studies (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2017; Pinter, 2007, 2019) either in whole class or in pair work, is a useful resource for language instruction. As pointed out by Pinter (2019), especially for younger learners, repetition is part of children’s play. Task familiarity also reduces the need for procedural instructions and scaffolding, while increasing accuracy and fluency, and fosters confidence. Learners are likely to notice their own progress, especially if the teacher helps raise such awareness. In order for primary language classrooms to be communicative, they need to be planned and organized to facilitate communication in terms of scaffolded input and output. The paramount goal is to have learners experience successful communication, which strengthens their confidence and sense of agency (Arnold, 2011). Combining pair work and repetition has potential benefits for language performance, learning, and self-confidence, creating a safe environment that is likely to expand and allow YLLs to work within their ZPD.

As regards work mode, discussions among frequently anxious learners suggested heavy reliance on the teacher to lead the work in whole class and learners’ appreciation of scaffolding, such as visual aids, linguistic modelling and some L1. Working with activities in the whole class increased safety as learners did not risk falling behind. Yet, in this work mode, many of these learners refrained from speaking and asking questions. Working individually, however, often sparked stress and frustration and fear of falling behind.

Learners with recurrent FLA spoke of their classmates in terms of both support and threat. These learners prefer pairs or groups that match their own proficiency to feel most comfortable. Pfenninger and Singleton (2019), found mixed ability classrooms to cause boredom in some learners and anxiety in others. Similar trends could be discerned among the participants in the present classrooms. Allowing more and less advanced learners to work in more homogeneous constellations at times affords them possibilities to interact on a variety of levels, in their ZPD. This may prove effective to reduce anxiety but also to deal with heterogeneity within the group. There can be an element of choice and the activities can be tailored to offer differing levels of scaffolding and challenge. During the activity the teacher may offer further support for those who need it the most. Some of these YLLs specifically called
for opportunities to practice tasks in safe pair constellations that could then be repeated in front of another small group, or eventually to the whole class. Combining increased talk time and more varying work modes may potentially address a lot of the discomfort that frequently anxious learners experience while also integrating more repetition but also variation into the lessons. Again, most YLLs do not generally experience FLA. Yet, by attending to measures to prevent FLA and meet the needs of the more anxious learners, all learners are likely to benefit from a more pragmatic approach to the implementation of CLT in primary school. In this way the teacher can capitalize on the strengths that young learners bring to the foreign language classroom.

According to Hamre et al. (2013), quality in primary education encompasses three dimensions, an emotional, an organizational and an instructional, stressing that emotional considerations and the creation of a warm and supportive atmosphere are necessary conditions in order to implement qualitative instruction. These claims resonate well with the perception of the YLLs in this context. Apart from stressing the importance of emotion, these learners addressed both organizational and instructional preferences and concerns. Furthermore, there is striking agreement between what scholars have defined as quality in primary language education and what these young learners call for; they want support, scaffolding and instructions that they can understand, and they want to dare to interact and feel agentic (Copland & Ni, 2019; Enever, 2018; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016).

This thesis stems from a concern about the prevalence of, and challenges associated with emergent FLA in primary school. By analyzing YLLs’ experiences and their beliefs, their sense of agency and the emotionally infused mismatches were made visible. Emotional and socioemotional aspects of learning enrich a sociocultural understanding of the ZPD. Teaching thus aims to broaden the ZPD and ensure that instruction remains within this zone for as many of the learners as possible. In the case of learners with recurrent FLA this may involve increasing the overlap between their beliefs and their experiences, in other words, attempting to merge the circles (according to Figure 3 in Section 7.2). Moreover, counteracting the development of FLA in early education may be one of the best ways to reduce such negative emotions later on.
8.3 Limitations

Although the number of participants was rather substantial, the classrooms involved are not thought to be representative for Sweden as a whole, considering the lack of socioeconomic diversity and linguistic backgrounds of the learners. Moreover, I was invited into the classrooms by the participating teachers, which suggests that they felt confident about their English and their teaching, in a way that may not be representative for all classroom contexts.

Individual background variables are diverse in any Swedish primary classroom and are thus beyond the control of language teachers, and also beyond the scope of this thesis. As clarified in Section 1.3 in the introduction, the present thesis does not focus on underlying sources and personal characteristics of YLLs that may affect the prevalence of FLA in the present classrooms. Thus, no data variables such as proficiency, out-of-school exposure or family conditions were collected, although such factors are assumed to interact with learners’ FLA, beliefs, experiences and sense of agency. Alternative approaches that thoroughly contextualize results could contribute with valuable findings that further inform our understanding of the way YLLs approach and respond to language instruction.

As regards learners’ accounts of their own behavior, this may not necessarily correspond to their actual classroom actions (Pinter, 2011). Furthermore, it may be challenging for children to express their beliefs. Those beliefs that have been explicitly addressed either in societal discourse of in the respective classroom may be more consciously accessible to learners and easier to verbalize, while other thoughts that may also be at play will be more challenging to formulate (Dufva et al., 2011).

The methodological approaches used in the studies have their limitations. Summarizing the reflections in Section 7.5, one questionnaire item was poorly worded. Furthermore, the group discussion setup has benefits and drawbacks. Due to the brevity of the discussions, no in-depth data was collected. Yet, the activity made it possible to engage many learners. The ecological and informal nature of the activity reduced the power dynamics between the adult researcher and the children. The possibility of asking for clarifications or elaborations was, consequently, also lost. Moreover, the dialogic interaction meant to empower learners and facilitate their discussions on beliefs and experiences, also involved group dynamics that an adult could more easily have moderated. On occasions, it was furthermore obvious that the discussion took a less serious direction (as discussed in Sections 6.4.2 and 7.5). Since participants in any interaction (including interviews) position themselves, they...
may withhold their actual opinions. The co-constructed meaning-making may also have generated or accentuated more consensus among learners than would have emerged in one-to-one interviews with the researcher.

Individual learner interviews might have diversified the qualitative data. However, for reasons of safety, access and aim, interviews were not conducted (as discussed in Section 6.2.3). A primary concern was to offer safe conditions and increase learners’ willingness to share their thoughts and experiences. Collecting qualitative data from as many as 57 learners (in studies II and III) would have been difficult any other way. The purpose was not to focus on individual learners, but on FLA as a phenomenon and how learners experience language instruction, which justifies focusing on the bigger picture and the patterns within a larger group. Allowing learners, with limited experiences of language instruction and emergent metacognitive awareness, to interact in dialogical meaning-making was central.

Another limitation has to do with interpretation of language, on several levels. The accounts of young participants depend not only on their interpretations of questions and instructions, but also on each other’s responses. The analysis involved adult interpretation of children’s speech on a manifest level but also an understanding of activities and objects to which they were referring. The data were analyzed on several separate occasions, to confirm consistency. Involving several researchers in the analysis may have contributed to strengthen dependability, although I was the only one familiar with these classroom contexts.

8.4 Theoretical and practical contributions

The thesis makes both theoretical and practical contributions. As the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Swedish national curriculum dictate that the voices of children should be heard in matters that concern them, foregrounding the perspectives of YLLs is a goal in its own right.

Furthermore, the thesis provides theoretical contributions to the field of EYL within applied linguistics. A view of early English instruction from the vantage-point of those meant to benefit from it, reveals dimensions that have not previously been explored. Since most of these learners had belonged to the same class, taught by the same teachers as the rest of the group since year 1, they had received the same instruction and they did not have any other experiences of formal language instruction. The studies can therefore help
illustrate the social and contextual nature of learners’ beliefs and emergent FLA, that interact with personal and subjective characteristics, resulting in a wide range of anxiety levels within the same classroom walls. The study offers glimpses of the way learners understand and deal with negative emotion. Conceivably, YLLs in other educational contexts, and other classrooms, experience other mismatching beliefs and experiences. Nevertheless, there seem to be aspects of early classroom-based formal foreign language education and interaction, that may be transferable to other settings. These findings suggest that, confronted with incompatible beliefs and emotional needs, emotions may guide behavior more than beliefs, hampering a sense of agency in young learners.

As for the professional discourse within the field of early language teaching, the common threads and salient themes among the choir of young voices within and across primary English classrooms offer insights and food for thought in relation to teaching and classroom organization. The goals of early language instruction should focus on maintaining motivation and fostering self-confidence and agency in YLLs (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). Therefore, practices need to be developed that reduce, or at least do not increase, anxiety, while offering challenge and support, and cater to the needs of learners in classrooms with increasingly heterogeneous proficiency levels. Primary teacher education for generalist teachers must prepare and equip teachers with tools and strategies to meet cognitive and linguistic but also social and emotional needs of foreign language learners (Enever, 2018; Guz & Tetiurka, 2016). Addressing FLA during teacher education is important for student teachers who identify with negative emotions, but also in order to sensitize and prepare all future teachers for the prevalence of FLA in primary classrooms and possible measures to counteract it. Considering and discussing foreign language teaching and learning in terms of organizational, instructional but also emotional dimensions may be worthwhile.

Hopefully, these findings will reach primary English teachers, and inspire reflection and raise awareness among them about the great variety of reactions, beliefs, insights and possible mismatches that guide the behavior of YLLs in the classroom. Whereas teachers at higher levels in the educational system meet many learners who already have negative prior experiences that they cannot do much about, primary language teachers have unique opportunities to create positive experiences from the very beginning.

FLA needs to be understood within the classroom where it is manifested. Teachers may scrutinize and explore both indirect and more direct ways of
preventing anxiety among their learners. Like adult students, YLLs may benefit from sharing not only learner beliefs but also personal experiences of interacting and feeling nervous or embarrassed. In these classrooms, the majority of the learners were happy to be addressed and taken seriously. They were eager to participate, share their experiences and listen to their classmates. The perspectives of learners may very well offer new perspectives and help nuance and problematize the classroom context when approached with genuine curiosity. The questionnaire and group discussion prompts used in these studies allow for teachers to replicate the activities in their own classrooms. More direct ways of counteracting emergent FLA may involve the consideration of a suitable balance of TL and L1, and organizing activities that lower the thresholds for oral interaction. For instance, procedural instructions that are not related to the actual lesson content may need to be made perfectly clear to all learners.

There are, hence, a number of practical aspects to consider and explore in the effort to establish YLL-friendly classrooms, in light of the discussions in Section 8.2. Some findings and interesting tendencies in the data collected that are worthy of further investigation are considered below.

8.5 Future directions

It is hoped that the methods of data collection developed for the studies might inspire more research that allows the perspectives of YLLs to be considered. As for the specific focus on FLA and sense of agency in this thesis, the empirical data raise many questions that could not be explored within the scope of the research project. Data from all 225 learners were used in study I. In total, 62 group discussions were recorded, and transcribed, while only 18 were analyzed and used in study II and III. The remaining 44 recordings merit attention, both for ethical reasons of putting all data to use, and also to illuminate interesting issues to be explored.

For instance, less anxious learners made more references to learning English from interactions outside school, online and abroad, and the opportunities for learning from interactions with people in or from other countries. In contrast, the discussions among the classmates with recurrent FLA revolved around the classroom situation. With regards to English outside school, the young learners stressed the role of siblings and parents, as inspiration and support. Some learners spoke of situations abroad in terms of opportunities for learning and interacting in English, whereas others referred
to such instances as having to get by and cope with challenging situations, by, for instance, using gestures. Such difference would be interesting to explore further.

From lesson observations and discussions, the presence of frequent gamers, most often boys, was evident. They would mention different games and use phrases from games and social media in English during lessons but also during the recorded discussions. An interesting question is whether learners who may be prone to experience FLA opt to engage less with English online, or whether such engagement helps counteract it. Most of the learners who spoke of themselves as frequent gamers reported very low levels of FLA, although a few belonged to the group with recurrent FLA. The heterogeneous classroom, where some learners feel bored, while others feel anxious, merits further research, as it presents a predicament for teachers and learners alike. Learners who perceive that classmates are more confident and far ahead in their command of English may experience FLA. Observations in several classrooms revealed that some learners would contribute with English phrases that were quite advanced and far beyond the proficiency level of their classmates, thus adding to the amount of incomprehensible input in class. Both these responses, of boredom and FLA, may in fact be interconnected and lie at the heart of the challenge of teaching young learners who are diverse as far as their language proficiency from the very start of instruction, in a way that was not the case a decade ago.

A longitudinal approach would allow for investigating the development and consequences of FLA in a long-term perspective, and how these learners approach studies in their second foreign language, from year 6, which is much more of a foreign language than English is, in the Swedish context.

Other avenues for future research would be to conduct a similar study on learners in more linguistically heterogeneous classrooms to see whether their multilingual competence developed outside school helps reduce negative emotion related to language learning in a formal setting.

Most importantly, measures suggested by researchers to mitigate FLA and benefit foreign language interaction found support in the accounts of these YLLs. Hence, research on the effects of having teachers address and involve learners in discussions about emotional aspects of language learning, as well as practical ways of adjusting activities and work mode, would be valuable.

In connection to early foreign language instruction, another group that deserves scholarly attention, is student teachers, who are learners of English themselves, some of whom experience FLA in the university context. A generalist teacher education track, preparing teachers for primary school years
in Sweden, involves mandatory English courses for students who have not specifically opted to become foreign language teachers, as opposed to the secondary school specialist language teacher program. The question is how to reduce such negative emotion during seminars within a university context and to overcome it in order to be positive TL user role models for their learners. Furthermore, the current findings are important to consider for all student teachers, regardless of their own experiences of FLA, as they will all face learners who do not feel comfortable speaking English. Barcelos and Kalaja (2013) justly point to the importance of exploring the perspectives of students preparing to become teachers of English, as they will influence generations of learners to come. In parallel to this argument, a more nuanced understanding of YLLs is also important, since their experiences of early English instruction will have a long-term effect on their attitudes, self-perceptions and expectations as adults, of whom some are future student teachers.

This thesis hopes to inspire more investigations that allow and empower YLLs to express and share their experiences and discuss matters related to language teaching from their perspective. Doing so helps us broaden and deepen our understanding of crucial aspects of EYL and direct our attention to issues that have been overlooked. The concerns of YLLs themselves may inform teaching approaches that all learners in the primary classroom may benefit from.
9. Summary in Swedish

9.1 Bakgrund och syfte
Syftet med avhandlingsarbetet i sin helhet är att öka kunskapen om hur svenska elever på låg- och mellanstadiet uppfattar och förhåller sig till undervisning och muntlig interaktion i ämnet engelska. I tre delstudier undersöks elevers föreställningar om och erfarenheter av språkundervisningen, med avsikt att belysa elevers talängslan och upplevd agens, särskilt hos de elever som upplever oro i samband med engelsklectioner. Med talängslan (eller närmare bestämt målspråkstalängslan 'foreign language anxiety'; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986) åsyftas nervositet och obehag i relation till muntlig klassrumsinteraktion på engelska.\(^\text{15}\) Begreppet upplevd agens (sense of agency; Mercer, 2012) syftar på elevers subjektiva bedömning av sitt eget handlingsutrymme i en viss situerad kontext, d.v.s. vad varje enskild elev själv känner sig kapabel och villig att göra i relation till undervisningsaktiviteter och klassrums situationen.

Avhandlingen består av en kappa, med två övergripande forskningsfrågor, som besvaras med hjälp av delstudierna. Den första frågan är vilka erfarenheter av muntlig interaktion i engelska som elever ger uttryck för, och hur dessa anknyter till talängslan och agens, samt huruvida elevernas föreställningar om språkundervisning överensstämmer med deras egna erfarenheter. Den andra forskningsfrågan rör i vilken utsträckning dessa elevers tankar om hur språkinlärning bör gå till harmonierar med samtida forskning kring kommunikativ språkundervisning för yngre åldrar, där elevernas eget perspektiv sällan givits utrymme i forskning.

En rad omständigheter och infallsvinklar motiverar avhandlingsprojektet. Såväl läroplanen, Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2018), som FN:s konvention om barnets rättigheter, som från 2020 inkorporerats i svensk lag (SFS 2018:1197), betonar vikten av att lyssna till och beakta barns egna perspektiv i frågor som rör dem. I detta fall avses den undervisning i engelska som i en svensk kontext påbörjas

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\(^{15}\) Till skillnad från den engelska termen antyder det svenska begreppet att endast momentet tala åsyftas. Inom ramen för denna avhandling kommer denna begränsning dock att visa sig vara legitim.


samt brist på muntlig kommunikation elever emellan (Schröter & Molander Danielsson, 2015). Samtidigt bidrar barns ökande användning av engelska utanför skolan till stor spridning i språkfärdigheten redan från början av lägstadiet (Håkansson, 2019), vilket utgör en utmaning för läraren och dessutom ökar risken att vissa elever känner frustration, medan andra blir utträkade (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). En global studie med lärare i engelska för yngre åldrar (Copland et al., 2014) visar att det som lärare upplever som mest utmanande i sin profession är att förmå yngre elever att tala på målspråket, samt att undervisa grupper med heterogen språkfärdighet.

Språkundervisning för yngre elever bygger ofta på metoder och modeller som tagits fram för vuxna inlärare. Alltfler forskare har pekat på vikten av att problematisera och undersöka barns språkinlärning i syfte att utveckla undervisning som tar hänsyn till barns kognitiva, språkliga, social och emotionella utveckling (Garton & Copland, 2019; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). Målet för tidig engelskundervisning anses internationellt i allt högre grad vara att bidéhålla barns motivation och stärka självförtroende och agens, snarare än att nå en specifik språkfärdighet (Copland & Ni, 2019; Enever, 2018; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019).

Mot denna bakgrund ses idag ett ökat forskningsintresse för unga elevers språkinlärning i en skolkontext, och en medvetenhet om vikten av att ta tillvara deras perspektiv för att främja utvecklingen av åldersadekvat språkundervisning. Dessutom har barns förmåga att bidra med tillförlitliga och relevanta uppgifter om sig själv och sin inlärning uppvärderats (Kolb, 2007; Muñoz, 2014; Pinter & Zandian, 2015). Datainsamling behöver dock noga anpassas till barns behov och förutsättningar (Scott, 2000).

9.2 Teoretiska utgångspunkter

Med utgångspunkt i sociokulturell teori ses lärande som en social och situerad process. Barns utveckling drivas av interaktion med andra, där de utvecklar sitt tänkande och sin förmåga att styra sina handlingar. Många forskare menar att det starka fokuset på sociala aspekter bland människor på gruppnivå lett till att det de individuella perspektiven tappats bort. Ett
sociokognitivt perspektiv understryker de individuella drivkrafterna i mänsklig utveckling; individens lärande bottnar i en inre strävan till anpassning och tillhörighet, utifrån en egen agens. För att bättre förstå alla de reaktioner och beteenden som kommer till uttryck i ett och samma klassrum behövs båda dessa perspektiv, och en medvetenhet om att sociala och kognitiva aspekter av lärande inbegriper varandra.


9.3 Metod och data
Avhandlingsprojektets empiriska data samlades in från 225 elever i åk 2–5, i tio olika klassrum, med sju lärare, på sex kommunala grundskolor. Klassrummen liknade varandra såtillvida att de undervisades av behöriga engelsklärare i socialt välfungerande och välorganiserade klassrum i urbana miljöer. Eleverna hade liknande socioekonomisk och språklig bakgrund, med

Vetenskapsrådets riktlinjer för god forskningssed var vägledande genom hela projektet. För att värna elevernas välbefinnande, men också för att säkerställa att deras uppgifter och reflektioner var så tillförlitliga som möjligt, var det av stor vikt att eleverna kände sig trygga och ville delta, och att de upplevde att deras erfarenheter och tankar togs på allvar. De blev informerade om syftet med studien, hur datainsamling skulle gå till och hur data skulle komma att användas. Medverkan i studien krävde vårdnadshavares samtycke samt elevernas informerade och aktiva medgivande. Hela datainsamlingen, inklusive information, instruktioner och aktiviteter, genomfördes på svenska.

Observationer genomfördes vid några tillfällen med varje lärare. Syftet var samla bakgrundsinformation och stämma av att de kommande frågorna och diskussionspunkterna skulle upplevas som begripliga och relevanta för eleverna. Dessutom underlättes analysen av de inspelade gruppsamtalen, genom en större förståelse hos forskaren för klassrumskontexterna och de aktiviteter och arbetssätt som eleverna var vana vid.

Studie I var en kvantitativ enkätstudie med alla projektets 225 elever och fokuserade på elevernas egna upplevelser av talängslan under engelskundervisning. Eleverna fick lyssna till sju påståenden som lästes upp, och välja svarsalternativ att ringa in på en svarsblankett. Påståendena handrade exempelvis om huruvida det kändes nervöst att säga fel inför klassen eller att inte förstå läraren (se Appendix). En deskriptiv statistisk analys gjordes för att belysa förekomsten av talängslan i gruppen som helhet och i olika klassrum, samt vilka vanliga rutiner och situationer som triggade elevers talängslan under engelskundervisning.

Studie II och III samlades kvalitativa data in, för att närmare utforska elevernas egna föreställningar och erfarenheter av engelskundervisning. Studie II fokuserade på alla elever i det klassrum där eleverna hade rapporterat mest frekvent talängslan. Med hjälp av diskussionsfrågor genomförde eleverna samtal i grupper om 3, ibland 4, personer där de i tur och ordning drog diskussionsfrågor ur en burk, läste upp och samtalade om dessa, medan de audioinspelades. Frågorna rörde elevernas tankar om och erfarenheter av engelskundervisning och språkinlärning (se Appendix). Metoden tillät på så vis eleverna att delta i dialogisk interaktion där de tillsammans kunde pröva

9.4 Resultat från delstudierna

Syftet med studie I var att undersöka förekomsten av talängslan bland eleverna och de klassrumspraktiker som framkallar negativa känslor. Av de 225 eleverna uppgav 18 % att de ofta, nästan alltid eller alltid upplevde talängslan i samband med vanliga lektionssituationer, vilket antyder att fenomenet kan vara ganska vanligt förekommande även i andra låg- och mellanstadiklassrum i Sverige. Viktigt att poängtera är dock att elevernas talängslan var fördelad längs ett kontinuum; nästan hälften av eleverna rapporterade regelbunden talängslan i något sammanhang. Samtidigt hade alla de 41 eleverna med mest frekvent talängslan en unik svarsprofil, sett till enkätfrågorna. Med andra ord reagerade elever som ofta upplevde obehag och nervositet mycket olika och förhöll sig olika till vanliga klassrumsrutiner. Vissa andra elever, med mer sporadisk talängslan, upplevde stor oro över vissa moment. Sammantaget uttryckte eleverna att de framförallt blev nervösa kring sin egen talprestation, inför klassen; begreppet talängslan är således en lämplig benämning.

Alla klassrum hade någon elev som ofta upplevde talängslan under engelskulektioner, även om spridningen var mycket varierad, också mellan klasser som undervisades av samma lärare (se Tabell 5 i Avsnitt 7.1). De flesta eleverna med frekvent talängslan ansåg att engelska var det skolämne där de kände sig mest illa till mods. Resultaten bekräftar därmed talängslan som ett
situationsspecifikt fenomen (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b), där vissa lektionsmoment triggar negativa reaktioner hos en del elever. Enkätstudien genererade nya frågor om huruvida mer talängsliga elever hyste föreställningar om språkinlärning, samt förväntningar på sig själva och andra, som skilje sig från de mindre talängsliga klasskamraternas.

Studie II fokuserade på det klassrum där talängslen var mest frekvent och där 11 av de 29 eleverna uppegett att de ofta kände sig nervösa och illa till mods, och där läraren enbart talade engelska under målspråkslektionerna. Den kvalitativa analysen visade bland de mer talängsliga eleverna tre dilemma. För det första uttryckte de alltså att det var bra att läraren endast talade engelska under lektionerna, även om de inte alltid förstod vad läraren sade. Vidare betonade eleverna att man lär sig av att tala målspråket och att det är viktigt att elever vågar tala och chansa. Allt detta stämde väl överens med uppfattningen som läraren uttryckte i klassrummet. Däremot identifierades bland de mer talängsliga eleverna tre dilemma. För det första uttryckte de alltså att det var bra att läraren endast talade engelska under lektionerna, även om de inte alltid förstod vad läraren sade. Deras egna utsagor, som bekräftades av observationerna, visade samtidigt att de hade svårt att delta i undervisningen då de inte förstod vad läraren sade, framförallt då de inte förstod lärarens instruktioner, och att de ofta hade svårt att svara på tilltal. För det andra hävdade de mer talängsliga eleverna att det var viktigt att de själva vågade prata engelska, även om de sa fel. Samtidigt tillstod många av dem att det kändes obekvämt, läskigt och pinsamt och att de själva föredrog att vara tysta och avstå från att prata. För det tredje förlitade sig dessa elever starkt på läraren. I helklass kunde de dra nytta av visuella hjälpmedel och lärarens stöttning och modellering. Under individuellt arbete riskerade de istället att hamna på efterkälken och bli sittande utan att ha förstått instruktionerna. Ironiskt nog vad det i den helklassundervisning de själva föredrog som det var mest socialt utmanande att engagera sig muntligt; tröskeln för att ställa frågor, be om förtydliganden och att prata själva upplevdes vara hög i den situationen.

Samtalerna i gruppen var mest talängsliga eleverna antydde att deras upplevda handledningsutrymme, d.v.s. deras agens, minskade, som ett resultat av motsättningarna mellan deras uttryckta föreställningar om hur språkundervisning och inlärning borde gå till å ena sidan, och deras upplevda erfarenheter å andra sidan. Resultaten pekade mot en konceptualisering av upplevd agens som en överlappning mellan föreställningar och emotionella erfarenheter (se Figur 3 i Avsnitt 7.2). För de elever som kände att de kunde agera utifrån sina ideal, överlappade föreställningar och erfarenheter mycket, och deras upplevda agens stärktes. För mer talängsliga elever som inte kände
sig kapabla att agera på det sätt de själva menade att elever borde, drog ideal och känslor åt olika håll, vilket reducerade deras upplevda agens; de avstod från att interagera och föredrog att låta andra tala. Dessa elever uttryckte ingen kritik mot läraren, utan var lojala med dennes principer. Istället drog de slutsatsen att de själv var för fega eller för dåliga på engelska.

Klassrummet i studie II var ganska ovanligt, avseende den enspråkiga undervisningen och den höga andelen elever som upplevde talängslan. Nästa studie undersökte därför huruvida elever med frekvent talängslan i andra klassrum, med andra lärare och i andra typer av undervisningspraktiker, upplevde liknande konflikter, samt hur deras agens kunde förstås.

De empiriska data som låg till grund för studie III utgjordes av tio elevsamtal med engelskelever i åk 2–5, som rapporterat att de ofta kände talängslan. Dessa elever kom från sju olika klassrum och undervisades av sex olika lärare. Analysen visade på friktioner mellan föreställningar och erfarenheter som var slående lika de bland frekvent talängsliga eleverna i studie II. Trots att eleverna i studie III var vana vid olika sätt att hantera engelska och svenska i de respektive klassrummen tillstod de att det var förknippat med oro och nervositet i de fall de förväntades interagera muntligt med läraren inför klassen eller agera enligt instruktioner givna på engelska. Att fråga, be om förtydliganden eller, på lärarens direkta fråga, tillstå att man inte hade förstått verkade inte ses som ett alternativ för dessa elever. De beskrev istället hur de sökte dra nytta av att iaktta andra elever, dra slutsatser utifrån sin arbetsbok eller helt enkelt bara vänta och hoppas på förtydliganden på svenska. Samma diskrepans mellan elevernas uttalade föreställningar och deras egna rapporterade upplevelser och beteenden bekräftades därmed bland elever med frekvent talängslan, oberoende av klassrum.

9.5 Diskussion och slutsatser

Avhandlingens bidrag utgörs av såväl teoretiska slutsatser kring formell språkinlärning som praktiska implikationer vad gäller klassrumsbaserad engelskundervisning för yngre elever. Talängslan är förknippad främst med den egna muntliga produktionen. Elever förstår viken av att få höra målspråket talas, och accepterar dessutom att inte förstå allt som sägs. Deras föreställningar är i linje med lärarnas, och med kursplanen. Det är först när eleverna förväntas agera utifrån lärarens input, i form av att svara, bidra muntlig, agera eller utföra aktiviteter, som talängslan triggas.
Känslomässiga dimensioner av kognitiva och sociala processer är tydliga i de tre studierna. Eleverna med frekvent talängslan uttryckte rationella tankar och resonemang. Men även dessa samtal, där de ombads formuleran sina föreställningar, genomsyrades av emotionella aspekter. Eleverna som ofta upplevde talängslan gav uttryck för motstridiga tankar och behov, där strävan att undvika negative reaktioner styrde deras beteende i högre utsträckning än deras uppfattning om språkinlärning. Därmed levde de inte upp till sina egna föreställningar om hur elever borde bete sig, vilket påverkade deras självbild och upplevelse av agens negativt.


På många sätt finner elevernas perspektiv och idéer stöd i samtida forskning kring sätt att anpassa kommunikativa aktiviteter för unga elever, där stöttning, repetition och interaktion är centrala inslag. Några konkreta

Talängsliga elever efterlyser också rikligt med möjligheter att träna sin muntliga förmåga utan social exponering inför hela klassen. Att få öva med en partner eller i en liten grupp skapa tryggare förhållanden och ökar taltiden för varje elev. Då elever utför samma eller en liknande uppgift upprepade gånger kan de stärka sitt självförtroende och sitt språkliga flyt och lättare se sina egna framsteg, vilket styrks av tidigare forskning (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2017; Pinter, 2007). Att finna sätt att minska helklassundervisning till förmån för mer elevinteraktion, under mer autentiska och naturliga former, är dessutom ett möjligt sätt att i högre utsträckning hantera de varierande behoven i klassrum med heterogen språkfärd. Med självförtroende och upplevd agens som ledstjärna i yngre åldrar behöver undervisningen utformas med ambitionen att skapa optimala förutsättningar för elevernas muntliga interaktion, där alla elever känner att de kan och vågar prata. Positiva erfarenheter av lyckad kommunikation kan vara sätt att både motverka talängslan och stärka agens.


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Appendix

Questionnaire study I

The following statements were read out loud, and explained further if necessary, in Swedish. The learners had response sheets with only the response options, in Swedish, and circled one response to each item.

**Statements in Swedish**

1. Jag är rädd att säga fel på engelska.
2. Jag blir orolig när jag inte förstår allt som läraren säger på engelska.
3. Det känns ok för mig att prata engelska i par eller smågrupper.
4. Jag blir mer nervös på engelskan än när vi jobbar med andra ämnen.
5. Jag räcker gärna upp handen på engelskan.
6. Jag är rädd att de andra ska fnissa åt mig eller reta mig när jag pratar engelska.
7. Jag blir nervös när jag ska prata engelska utan att ha förberett mig/övat.

Learners circled on of the following response options to it items 1, 2, 4, 6, 7:

- Aldrig
- Nästan aldrig
- Sällan
- Ibländ
- Ofta
- Nästan alltid
- Alltid

Response options to items 3 and 5:

- Alltid
- Nästan alltid
- Ofta
- Ibländ
- Sällan
- Nästan aldrig
- Aldrig

**Questionnaire, English translation**

Statements:

1. I am afraid of making mistakes in English.
2. It makes me nervous when I do not understand everything the teacher says in English.
3. It feels ok to speak English in pairs or small groups.
4. I feel more nervous during English lessons than while working with other school subjects.
5. I gladly volunteer to answer questions in English.
6. I am afraid the others will giggle or tease me when I speak English.
7. I feel nervous if I am asked to speak in English without having prepared or practiced first.

Learners circled one of the following response options to items 1, 2, 4, 6, 7:
Never  Almost never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often  Almost always  Always

Response options to items 3 and 5:
Always  Almost always  Often  Sometimes  Rarely  Almost never  Never

Group discussion questions study II and III
The following questions were discussed in random order, in Swedish, in the independent group discussions.

Original wording in Swedish:

- Tror du att olika personer lär sig engelska på olika sätt? Berätta.
- Vad tycker du är viktigast när du pratar engelska – att det du säger är rätt, eller att andra förstår vad du menar, även om du säger lite fel?
- Tycker du att det är smart att chansa, när det är något man inte kan på engelska?
- Känner du att du lär dig mycket på att öva och repetera och göra saker flera gånger?
- Vad tycker du är det viktigaste att lära sig i engelska? Varför?
- Tror du att du kommer att bli väldigt duktig på engelska när du blir äldre?
- Tycker du att det är naturligt att göra fel när man lär sig engelska? Berätta.

**English translations:**

- Do you think it’s good or bad that the teacher speaks a lot of English even though the students may not understand everything? Explain what you think.
- Do you think different people learn English in different ways? Tell me.
- What do you think is most important when you speak English – that what you say is correct or that others understand what you mean, although you may say things a bit incorrectly?
- Do you think it’s smart to guess when there is a word you don’t know in English?
- In your experience, do you learn a lot by practicing and repeating and doing things several times?
- What do you think is the best way to learn how to speak English? Explain what you think.
- In your opinion, what are the most important things to learn in English? Why?
- What is the best way for you to learn English? Tell me.
- Do you think you will be quite good at English once you get older?
- Do you learn best when you listen or when you speak? Explain what you think.
- How do you feel when you are working with something that is new or a bit difficult? Tell me.
- Do you think you learn a lot by imitating and repeating after others? Explain what you think.
- Do you believe it’s natural to make mistakes when you learn English? Tell me.