

English language learning and outdoor education: A practical approach for developing oral skills

Av **Tone Stuler Myhre**, Associate Professor, Nord University, Levanger

Introduction

Stemming from the author's PhD project, this article highlights the potential of outdoor education to develop the oral English communication skills of lower secondary students. Based on a comparison of lessons conducted in and outside the classroom, the findings suggest that outdoor educational environments are a possible response to the call for more practical, varied and motivating English instruction in Norwegian lower secondary schools. Drawing on some activities implemented during the project, the article presents the

affordances of outdoor environments for meaningful language learning, enhanced motivation and reduced language anxiety. It also discusses the practical implications of outdoor education, as well as its potential limitations.

Inspired by John Dewey's idea that learning should involve both mind and body, outdoor education connects indoor and outdoor learning so that classroom work meets the real world (Quay & Seaman, 2013). Outdoor education is understood as the use of alternative learning arenas

outside the classroom, such as the school grounds or local area, while still focusing on curriculum aims and creating links to classroom work. Typical outdoor education activities involve movement, sensory experiences, place based learning and spontaneous communication, and may either be linked to specific locations or simply make use of being outside.

Compared to the classroom, outdoor environments often make it easier for students to interact and participate. The additional space reduces the feeling of



Visiting a historical site, Source: Gemini AI generated.

being observed by peers and teacher(s) and lowers performance pressure (Myhre & Fiskum, 2021; Myhre et al., 2023; Myhre et al., 2025). As a result, many students become more willing to speak, which is essential for developing oral skills. In this way, outdoor education can support more practical, engaging and communication-focused English teaching.

Why a practical approach is needed

Policy documents emphasise the need for more practical and varied teaching in all subjects (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020; Meld. St. 34, 2023-2024). The white paper Meld. St.

34 (2023-2024) asserts that learning and teaching in Years 5–10 need to be more practical so that students will enjoy being at school, stay motivated and experience less boredom. Practical learning is understood to mean learning which includes the use of practical, exploratory, creative and physically active ways of working (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2026). In the subject English, this means creating situations where students actively use the language in meaningful contexts, since oral communication is at the heart of communicative language learning. However, it is challenging to develop oral communication skills, and

especially spontaneous speech, and students often experience *foreign language classroom anxiety* (Horwitz et al., 1986). This refers to anxiety which is specific to the foreign language learning situation and is often experienced in connection with oral communication. Hence, it is important to create situations where the students are not afraid to speak and where they can experiment with English.

Learning English through outdoor education

Outdoor education does not simply consist of moving learning and teaching outside the school buildings. Rather, it involves

structured activities where students use English in authentic or semi-authentic situations. These activities can typically be organised in pairs or small groups, enabling simultaneous speaking and increased participation.

Table 1 illustrates three examples of outdoor activities that support oral English learning through practical and meaningful communication. These activities were also implemented indoors with a separate control group of students.

The first column, “Activity”, identifies the task. The second column, “Environment”, describes the preferred environment for the activity, while the third column, “Equipment”, lists any required materials. The “Description” column outlines what students need to do to complete the acti-

Table 1: Outdoor English-speaking activities.

Activity	Environment	Equipment	Description	Teacher instructions
Describe & Guess Objects (30 min)	Area with many objects (trees, playground equipment, etc.)	None	Students stand back-to-back. One student describes an outdoor object while the other one guesses and runs to touch it. Roles are then swapped.	Organise students into pairs and position them back-to-back. Model useful descriptive language (size, colour, location), e.g. “It is big/small”, “It looks like...”, “It is next to...”. Emphasise that students must not turn around or point. Monitor interaction, support vocabulary as needed and signal clearly when pairs should swap roles.
Being a Guide (Fully place-based) (45 mins)	Local historic site	Keyword list	Students take turns guiding each other as if they were showing American visitors around the site, asking and answering questions along the way.	Introduce the context and model language for guiding (welcoming, explaining, responding to questions), e.g. “Welcome to...”, “This place was built...”, “It was used for...”, “Any questions?” Provide or revise key vocabulary before starting; students can bring a pre-prepared keyword list (homework). Organise students in pairs or small groups and clarify their roles. Encourage natural interaction rather than memorised speech. Circulate to support language use and prompt follow-up questions when needed.
Walk & Talk: Observations (Fully place-based) (15 mins)	Walking around the school or the local area	None	Students walk together and discuss what they observe during the walk, commenting on surroundings, people and events.	Explain the purpose of the walk and model useful observational language before starting, e.g. “I can see...”, “I think...”, “It reminds me of...”, “Maybe...”. Encourage students to walk in pairs or small groups and to take turns speaking. Prompt them to comment on what they see, hear or notice. Circulate during the walk to support interaction and, afterwards in the classroom, invite brief sharing or reflection.

vity, and the “Teacher instructions” column provides detailed guidance for the teacher.

According to the teachers working with the group, the place based activity (“Being a Guide”) at the local historic site turned out to be especially motivating and prompted extensive use of English. The authentic surroundings made the activity feel meaningful and gave students a clear purpose for using English. In contrast, the teacher of the indoor control group reported that the same activity did not work very well in the classroom. Since the students had to rely on photos of the historic buildings taped to the walls, the activity felt artificial and less engaging.

The students involved in the PhD project originally had two regular 45-minute English sessions per week. During the project period, these were combined into one longer weekly session (approximately 90 minutes) for the outdoor group to allow the students to walk to specific outdoor locations and back to the school. The effective teaching time was 80 minutes as ten minutes would be used to leave the classroom and get outside. The outdoor sessions involved a range of activities, including those listed in Table 1.

It should be emphasised that outdoor education does not have to be time consuming or involve long excursions away from the school to have educational potential. Valuable learning can take place by just stepping outside the school building. For example, instead of discussing a

given topic sitting at their desks, students can walk in pairs around the school grounds while discussing it (“walk-and-talk”).

Below are some quotes from students and teachers illustrating their thoughts on learning and teaching English outdoors; see Table 2.

The perspectives set out in Table 2 show that students felt reduced pressure, greater freedom and increased motivation when working outdoors. Teachers observed increased participation, especially among students who rarely speak in the classroom. Together, these reflections suggest that outdoor education can

Table 2: Some student and teacher perspectives on English outdoor education.

Student perspectives	Teacher perspectives
I feel I have more space. If I say something in the classroom everybody hears what I am saying.	The large amount of space outdoors makes them more sheltered compared to the classroom where we're close to one another... They become more courageous speakers outdoors.
In the classroom you feel that you need to perform, whereas outdoors you kind of forget this.	There were students I had hardly heard speaking English before... who spoke English.
...we usually just sit at our desks and pay attention; there is not much speaking.	...two of them are weaker students... One was not dependent on her manuscript and could produce simple sentences (referring to oral presentations held in the classroom after the project period was over)
I become more motivated when I'm outdoors because it's more fun than sitting at my desk.	I have a feeling that the weaker students have benefited most.
I lose focus when I have to sit still.	She was never concerned about making mistakes... She was very happy when we were outdoors.
I can't sit still that long.	She talked and talked.
You do not learn as much in the classroom. I feel I learn more when I am outdoors engaging in activities and so on.	
We normally sit at our desks all day, so it feels good to be outdoors.	

lower anxiety and encourage more active language use.

Figure 1 below shows the words and expressions that appeared most often in the interviews and audio recordings (students and teachers) along with the affordances associated with them. The size of each word/phrase does not necessarily reflect its importance. Overall, the words/phrases clearly suggest that students had a very positive attitude towards outdoor education.

support for developing students' oral English skills. However, the key implication is not simply that teachers should "go outside". Rather, teachers need to design structured and purposeful activities that create opportunities for meaningful communication.

The results indicate that outdoor education supports oral English development through a combination of three interconnected factors: reduced anxiety; increased motivation; and opportunities for

and practical, their motivation increases further.

Outdoor education may be particularly effective in supporting speaking because it can help reduce language anxiety. This can be explained by several features of outdoor environments:

- They provide more physical space, which allows students to spread out and interact more comfortably.
- They reduce the feeling of being observed by peers and teacher(s), which can lower performance pressure.
- They create a more informal learning atmosphere, where norms and expectations may feel less rigid and more conducive to experimentation with language.

This is clearly reflected in Table 2, where students describe feeling less pressure and greater willingness to speak, while teachers report increased participation, particularly among students who are usually reluctant to contribute in the classroom.

For teachers, this means that outdoor education can be particularly useful when the goal is to increase students' willingness to communicate by lowering barriers to participation, support weaker or less confident learners by providing a less intimidating language learning environment and create low-pressure

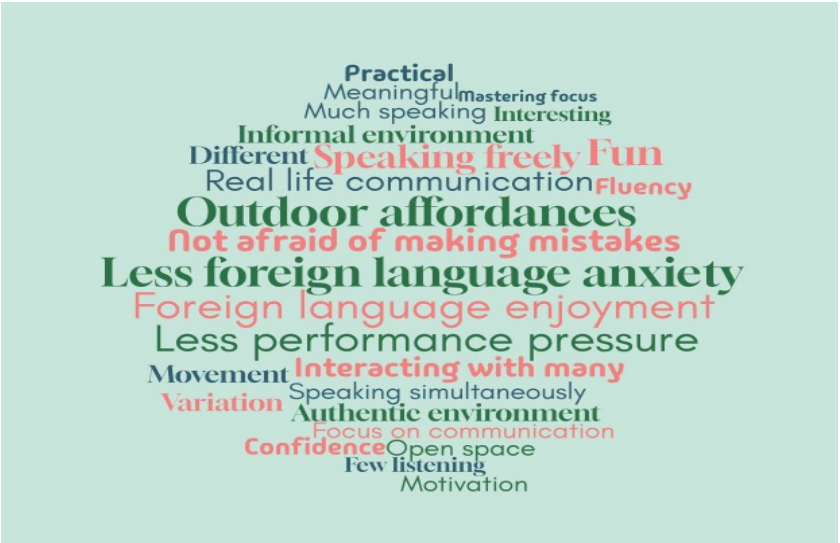


Figure 1: Words and phrases associated with English outdoor education.

Practical implications and potential limitations

Practical implications

The findings from the study suggest that outdoor education can provide valuable

meaningful communication. These factors appear to reinforce each other. When students experience less performance pressure, they are more likely to participate actively, and when activities are engaging

speaking situations that encourage risk-taking and engagement.

The activities presented in Table 1 illustrate how outdoor education can be implemented in practice. A key implication is that activities should require students to use English actively rather than passively listening, be organised in pairs or small groups so that many students can speak simultaneously and include a clear communicative purpose that gives students a reason to use the language meaningfully. For example, in place-based guiding activities, students take on a clear role (e.g. guide), which gives them a concrete purpose for using English in a meaningful and context-based situation. Teachers in the study observed that even less confident students participated and produced spoken language in these contexts. In walk-and-talk activities, students move while discussing a topic, often supported by simple prompts or questions provided by the teacher. The combination of movement and pair work helps to reduce pressure and allows students to speak more freely.

The following recommendations are intended to support teachers in implementing practical oral activities outdoors:

- Prepare students in the classroom by clearly explaining the location, activity (modelling), group organisation and duration of the outdoor session.



Source: Gemini AI generated.

- Use short activities that are easy to organise and integrate into regular lessons.
- Organise students in pairs or small groups to maximise speaking opportunities.
- Provide keywords and clear instructions, e.g. laminated sheets of keywords that students can bring with them to help scaffold communication.
- Focus on communication (fluency) over correctness (accuracy) to encourage participation and reduce anxiety about speaking.
- Promote movement and interaction to sustain engagement.
- Use simple, repeatable activities that students can become familiar with over time.

Teachers should keep in mind that outdoor education does not require extensive planning, as even small adaptations to existing practices can make a meaningful difference.

Possible limitations

Outdoor education also involves certain challenges and limitations. Weather and comfort can play an important role, as students who feel cold or uncomfortable are likely to participate less. In addition, organisation and control may be more demanding, since outdoor environments tend to be less structured than classrooms. There may also be variations in student engagement and needs, with some students requiring more support than others. Finally, time constraints and transitions must be considered, as moving between the indoor and outdoor learning environ-

ment requires planning. These limitations can, however, be managed by providing a clear structure and through thorough preparation.

Conclusion

Outdoor education offers a simple way to improve students' oral English by creating low-pressure situations where more students are willing to speak. When activities are properly structured and focus on communication, even less confident learners participate more actively. Teachers do not need to do extensive planning, as small, purposeful activities outside the classroom can make English teaching more practical, engaging and effective.

References

- Horwitz, E. K., M. B. Horwitz, and J. Cope. 1986. "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety." *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2): 125–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>.
- Meld. St. 34 (2023–2024). *En mer praktisk skole. Bedre læring, motivasjon og trivsel på 5.–10. trinn* [A more practical school. Better learning, motivation, and well-being in grades 5–10]. Kunnskapsdepartementet. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-34-20232024/id3052898/>
- Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2026). *Bruk av alternative og varierte opplæringsarenaer for klasser og enkeltlærere* [Use of alternative and varied learning arenas for classes and individual students]. <https://www.udir.no/laring-og-trivsel/tilpasset-opplaring-og-inkludering/en-mer-praktisk-skole/rom-for-mer-praktiske-og-varierte-arbeidsformer/>
- Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. (2020). *Overordnet del – verdier og prinsipper for grunnopplæringen* [Norwegian national curriculum, core curriculum]. <https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnetdel/>
- Myhre, T.S., Dewaele, J.-M., Fiskum, T.A., Holand, A.M. (2023). Anxiety and enjoyment among young teenagers learning English as a foreign language outdoors: A mixed-methods study. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 17(4), 827–844. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2022.2161550>
- Myhre, T.S., Fiskum, T.A., Holand, A.M. (2025). Motivation among young teenagers learning English as a foreign language outdoors: A mixed-methods study. *Acta Didactica Norden*. <https://doi.org/10.5617/adno.11953>
- Myhre, T. S., & Fiskum, T. A. (2021). Norwegian teenagers' experiences of developing second language fluency in an outdoor context. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 21(3), 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2020>
- Quay, J., & Seaman, J. (2013). *John Dewey and education outdoors: Making sense of the "educational situation" through more than a century of progressive reforms*. Sense Publishers.