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”How formative of you, teacher!”
Implementing formative assessment at Klara Södra Gymnasium

”Hur formativt av dig, lärare!”
Att tillämpa formativ bedömning på Klara Södra Gymnasium

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Abstract

Formative assessment, a type of assessment that promotes feedback and aims at targeting learners’ potentials rather than focusing on grades, is gaining more and more attention in the school-related debate. Therefore, the aim of this degree project was to gain an insight into the practice of formative assessment. More specifically, this degree project wanted to investigate a school which actively promotes this type of assessment, namely Klara Södra Gymnasium in Stockholm. My intention was to explore how such practice was and is experienced by pupils and teachers. Since the implementation of formative assessment at Klara Södra Gymnasium is a pilot project still in progress, the results of this degree project are to be treated mainly as an indication of how formative assessment is experienced at the school. Theories of formative assessment were largely treated in the background section. Generally, formative assessment at Klara Södra Gymnasium was perceived as positive by teachers as well as pupils. However, the implementation of it was not unproblematic. Pupils experienced some initial skepticism. Nevertheless, the commitment of the teachers helped the pupils appreciate this type of assessment and helped them to see the benefits and relevance of it. The results and discussion also show that formative assessment contributed to raise pupils’ learner awareness. In addition, the implementation of formative assessment played an important role in making pupils understand that summative assessment cannot be the only form of assessment used in the language classroom.

Key words: criteria, feedback, formative assessment, goals, learner awareness, peer response, scoring rubrics, summative assessment.
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1. Introduction

“Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I might remember; involve me and I’ll understand”  
Chinese proverb

“I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn”  
Albert Einstein

Assessing pupils will unequivocally raise constant dilemmas in a teacher, e.g. concerning how to assess and what to assess. The answers to these questions are to be found in both the curriculum and syllabi: teachers are expected to apply the goals expressed in them, that is to say, summative assessment is to be used at the end of each course and summarized in the form of a grade. The challenge is not simple considering that teachers need to reflect on several factors while assessing students, namely: the variety of pupils’ abilities and learning styles (i.e. multiple intelligences), motivational issues, emotional issues and classroom dynamics. In the course of this process every teacher will have to deal with two key concepts that will recur over the course of this degree project: assessment of learning and assessment for learning. The latter will be treated more intensively.

If an analogy is permitted here, it could be said that these two types of assessment are as crucial as the flour and the yeast for the baker. In order for the bread to rise, the baker is asked to put the right amount of both essential ingredients. Teachers, similarly, are required to manage both types of assessment in order to help pupils in their process of learning. This analogy caught the mind of this writer while considering formative assessment (or assessment for learning as it is often referred to) as the yeast teachers should “use” in their profession.

Not surprisingly, Skolverket¹ emphasizes that teachers should endeavor to find a balance while assessing the learner’s progression and the final product. Teachers should, to put this simply, make an effort to use both assessments for learning as well as assessment of learning.

¹ The Swedish National Board of Education
This is stated as follows by Skolverket

...assessment with the intention of finding out what the student has learned has a summative purpose, while assessment with the intention of enhancing student learning has a formative purpose. In everyday school work assessments are done with both purposes. (My translation)

Bearing this in mind, it can be argued that there should be a balance between formative and summative assessment. Ideally, the summative grade the pupil obtains at the completion of a course will be the result of a formative approach conducted by the teacher and the classroom.

1.1 Purpose statement and limitations

The object of this degree project is to scrutinize formative assessment and how this assessment idea is implemented and above all experienced at Klara Södra Gymnasium in Stockholm. The school will be referred to as KSG. Some principles of the intrinsic case study method have been used. More about this can be read in the method section.

The choice of investigating this particular school was due to the fact that KSG explicitly uses a formative approach in every subject taught. The school started using formative assessment in the spring term of 2010. This was intended as a pilot project which served the purpose of gathering data. If successful, formative assessment would then be implemented to all KSG’s sister schools throughout Sweden.

This degree project does not aim at proving whether formative assessment gives better results than summative assessment. Instead it aims at gaining an understanding of how formative assessment is experienced by both pupils and teachers on a daily basis. To put this simply, the degree project intends to gain a practical understanding of how teachers put formative assessment into practice and how this is experienced by pupils and teachers. The research questions for this investigation are:

- How do teachers experience their work with formative assessment?
- How do pupils experience their learning with formative assessment?
2 Background

In this section formative and summative assessment are described in relation to the curriculum for non-compulsory school forms 94 (Lpf 94) and the syllabus for English. In addition, a brief overview of formative assessment is provided. To begin with, a presentation of KSG is outlined.

2.1 Klara Södra Gymnasium

*KSG* is located at 12 Tullgårdsvägen, Stockholm. The school has 275 pupils, attending 3 national programmes with 5 different orientations:

- Social Science: Web/Media, Leadership and Communication. Law and Economics. Human Resources and Behavior.
- Natural Science: Leadership.

The school as a whole has a theoretical profile. A work force of 17 teachers, a head teacher, a deputy head teacher, a cafeteria employee, a nurse and a counselor, comprise the professionals of *KSG*. The school is privately owned and also free of charge. Skolverket’s definition of independent schools is as follows:

Independent upper secondary schools correspond to municipal upper secondary schools in that they offer upper secondary programs and receive grants from the municipality. It is the National Agency for Education that decides whether an independent upper secondary school qualifies for this grant or not. This decision can also be rescinded. Independent upper secondary schools are open to everyone. In some cases, students may be charged a fee for attending.

*KSG* is owned by *Theeducation AB*, a private company within the education branch. The upper secondary school has six sister schools located in different cities in Sweden, namely *Klara Norra Gymnasium* in Stockholm, *Klara Gymnasium* in Karlstad, *Klara Nya*
Gymnasium in Malmö, Klara Gymnasium in Linköping, Klara Gymnasium in Västerås and Klara Gymnasium in Södertälje. All schools vary in size with regards to pupils’ numbers; however, the number oscillates between 55 and 315. One of the commitments for Theducation AB when it comes to its upper secondary schools is to preserve a familiar atmosphere, where the head teacher’s and teachers’ aim is to be known to all pupils.

The school was established in 2001, formerly under the name of Infokompgymnasiet, also owned by Theducation AB group.

As mentioned earlier, the school started a “formative assessment implementation project” in the spring term of 2010. The initiator of this project was head teacher Lena De Bruin. As she explained, she gathered a few teachers around her and asked them whether they were interested in considering a change in their praxis with regards to assessment. A group of teachers who were willing to broaden their understanding of formative assessment accepted the challenge and the project was launched. The reason behind this implementation was expressed as follows: “To be honest, I felt that there was some discontent among the students while discussing their final grades and therefore I wanted to do something about it”. Interest for the project grew stronger and the “knowledge gathered by the initial group of teachers was passed on to the other teachers”…“Nowadays almost every teacher at KSG works formatively to some extent”, Lena explained.

2.2 Formative assessment

Formative assessment or assessment for learning (as it sometimes is referred to), is a method of assessment that serves the purpose of raising pupils’ awareness of their own learning and capabilities. Gardner (2006) defines this process as follows: “The process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there” (p. 2).

Thus this definition has a complex set of underlying factors that need to be taken into account. Gardner cites above all “student teacher interaction, self reflection (teacher and student), motivation and a variety of assessment processes” (p. 2). According to Gardner the principles that constitute assessment for learning can be summarized in ten points:
Assessment for learning

- is part of effective planning
- focuses on how students learn
- is central to classroom practice
- is a key professional skill
- is sensitive and constructive
- fosters motivation
- promotes understanding of goals and criteria
- helps learners know how to improve
- develops the capacity for self-assessment
- recognizes all educational achievements

Needless to say, these principles are to be applied in a manner that helps the learner with the purpose of “helping him or her how to learn”. The Common European Framework (CEF) defines formative assessment as:

… an ongoing process of gathering information on the extent of learning, on strengths and weaknesses, which the teacher can feed back into their course planning and the actual feedback they give learners. Formative assessment is often used in a very broad sense so as to include non-quantifiable information from questionnaires and consultations. (p. 186)

But how is formative assessment put into practice? Black et al (2003) identify four areas that are paramount within formative practice:

- Questioning
- Feedback through marking
- Peer and self assessment by students
- The formative use of summative tests (p. 31)

More about these areas can be read in the previous research section.
2.3 Summative assessment

A definition of summative assessment can be read in CEF, where the following is stated: “Summative assessment sums up attainment at the end of the course with a grade. It is not necessarily proficiency assessment. Indeed a lot of summative assessment is norm-referenced, fixed-point, achievement assessment.” (p. 186).

2.4 The steering documents

In this section, a brief description of the curriculum for the non-compulsory school system 94 and the syllabus for English is given, with regards to formative assessment.

2.4.1 The curriculum for non-compulsory school system 94 (Lpf 94)

When considering formative assessment, although not explicitly stated, particular weight and responsibility is put on pupils’ awareness. Thus an indication on formative assessment and approach is given to pupils in the goals to strive for: “The school shall strive to ensure that all pupils take responsibility for their learning and study results” and “can assess their own study results and development needs in relation to the demands of the syllabi”.

As for teachers, the guidelines for assessment and grading the following state that: “the teacher shall: on a continuous basis give all pupils information on what is needed for development and success in studies”. Such indications are typical features of formative assessment, as we can read in Black and Wiliam (1998): “We use the general term assessment to refer to all those activities undertaken by the teachers and by their students in assessing themselves that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities” (p. 140).

2.4.2 The syllabus for English

In the syllabus for English the aim of the subject is presented alongside its educational role and what students should achieve. The function of the syllabus is to provide teachers with a goal-based agenda, where they will have to take goals to strive towards and goals to attain into account while planning courses. Students are supposed to develop their knowledge by striving to reach the goals to strive towards, while goals to attain are the basic goals which
students need to achieve in order to pass. Pupils can attain goals depending on criteria stated in the syllabus. The following goal to attain from the syllabus for English A is of particular relevance for this degree project: “pupils shall be able to consciously use and evaluate different approaches to learning in order to promote learning”.

In addition, in order to achieve a Pass, pupils need to “take responsibility for planning, carrying out and evaluating their work, as well as using appropriate aids”.

Furthermore, when considering English B, the goal to attain worth taking into consideration is the following: “pupils shall be able to evaluate their work in order to change and enhance their learning”. With regards to this and in order to pass “the pupil shall: plan, carry out and evaluate their work in an effective way”.

These goals are connected to learning awareness which is a primary feature of formative assessment and it will be treated later in the text.
3 Previous research

In this section, previous research on formative assessment is discussed. The focus is placed on Anders Jönsson’s research and the studies of Black & Wiliam. The King's Medway Oxford Formative assessment Project (KMOFAP) will also be mentioned.

3.1 Anders Jönssons’ research and formative assessment in Sweden

Anders Jönsson (2010), in the introduction of his book Lärande Bedömning, points out an interesting fact: he asserts that “there are indications that schools often teach one thing (such as “understanding”), however they tend to assess something else, which can be categorized as notions and memory skills” (my translation) (p. 5). Jönsson is of the idea that one of the causes for this lies in the conventional way of assessing, by means of written assignments at the end of every chapter. He sees this as a consequence of the previous assessment system which is still present in teachers’ assessment repertoires. The assessment system Jönsson refers to is the so called norm-referenced system, the main purpose of which was to compare learners with the aim of differentiating and ranking them. The main concern of this system is that pupils are assessed according to a norm, to be exact, on how other pupils are performing, and not necessarily based on their own capabilities in a more holistic sense.

In 1994 Sweden switched to a criterion-referenced grading system where pupils are assessed in accordance to goals to attain and they are individually graded regardless of other pupils’ performances. The change came about since the “ranking function of the norm-referred grading system was no longer tangible” (p. 139) (my translation). Jönsson explains that another factor that contributed to the change was that one thought it was more important that grades gave neater information on pupils’ knowledge rather than (grades) functioning as a base for ranking.

Considering the above, another issue relevant for this degree project is the following: how can teachers measure knowledge? And why do we need to measure and assess knowledge
using grading? However, as the notion of knowledge in a school-related environment has changed over the years, where the ability to reflect and analyze has been treated as paramount, the question “how much” and “how many” becomes irrelevant. On the contrary, the question such “how well” (p. 33) becomes more interesting according to Eisner (as quoted in Jönsson, 2010).

Referring back to the foreword of this degree project where the dilemmas “what to assess” and “how to assess” were introduced, Jönsson believes that teachers not only must have the professional competence with regards to the subject taught, but they must, moreover, have the ability to assess knowledge and, what is more important, they “shall be able to motivate and argue their assessments” (p. 34) (my translation). In order for this to be feasible, teachers must be able to provide pupils with the understanding of goals and criteria. How is this to be achieved? Jönsson argues that there is no universal answer to this question and asserts that it is not sufficient to place a list of goals and criteria on an overhead projector for a few minutes for pupils to gain an understanding of what is required of them. Jönsson argues that it takes experience and variation. By experience Jönsson means that pupils need to become aware of concrete examples attached to goals and criteria in order to understand what is required of them. Jönsson argues that language is not enough if we want pupils to understand what is meant by the fact that a “text in English is coherent and structured, a mathematical calculation is clear and well presented, if pupils have never seen one” (p. 36) (my translation).

The above mentioned concept of variation runs parallel to the concept of experience. In order for pupil X to understand what is meant by “coherent and structured”, he or she will need to see “incoherent and unstructured” samples to facilitate understanding of the very concept of a “coherent and structured” text. Jönsson asks “how” we may obtain this variation. Sadler (as quoted in Jönsson, 2010) argues that “peer-assessment is the easiest and most natural way in order to gather a quantity of tasks of varying quality” (p. 37) (my translation). Jönsson claims that if pupils are to solve the same task, they will adopt different strategies, which will lead to varying qualities.

In conclusion, Jönsson raises the dilemma whether we shall help pupils as much as we can or not. This obviously depends on the objectives teachers want to achieve with their assessment strategies. If we want to encourage learning, then we should be “as open as possible with what we want pupils that they should know, otherwise they must guess as they get along” (p. 38)
(my translation). If we, on the other hand aim to rank pupils, we cannot be as open with regards to what will be assessed.” (p. 39) (my translation).

Lastly, the advice that Jönsson gives is the following: “help pupils and give them support while assessing them. In that way they will perform more and they will learn at the same time. It is more educational to succeed while being helped rather than not to succeed at all” (p. 40) (my translation).

### 3.2 The use of matrices/rubrics

As mentioned earlier, one of the key issues put forward by Jönsson is that pupils need to see and understand the relevance of criteria and goals to strive towards and goals to attain in order to develop in their learning. According to Jönsson, this can be achieved in several ways. In practical terms, one effective tool is the use of rubrics.

What are rubrics then? Arter & McTighe provide the following definition (as quoted in Jönsson, 2008):

> a widespread definition is that the rubric is a scoring tool for qualitative rating of authentic or complex student work. A characteristic of rubrics is that they include criteria (i.e. important dimensions of performance) as well as standards for those criteria (i.e. qualitatively distinct levels of performance). By making the criteria and standards explicit, the rubric tells both instructor and student what is considered important and what to look for when assessing. (p. 53)

In formative assessment, criteria and goals need to be communicated openly to pupils. As Jönsson observes, “advocates for the use of rubrics for formative assessment assume that rubrics can promote student learning, as well as lead to positive changes in instruction” (p. 59). In view of the fact that transparency plays an important role within formative practice, Jönsson claims that “rubrics indicate what is important and thereby provide clarity and explicitness to the assessment, and this is deemed positive by students and teachers alike.”(p. 60). In addition, “it is assumed that the explicitness of criteria and standards are fundamental in providing the students with quality feedback, and rubrics can in this way promote student learning” (p. 54).
3.3 Research on formative assessment, Black & Wiliam’s *Inside the Black Box*

The roots of formative assessment can be traced back to 1967 when Scriven used the term *formative evaluation* for the first time. However, the concept of formative evaluation attained broader recognition in 1971 when Bloom, Hastings & Madaus published the *Handbook of Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning*. Cizek (1997) asserts that “Bloom’s work suggested important distinctions between the concepts of evaluation and assessment that are now widely accepted” (p. 6). Cizek argues that this distinction can be briefly summarized as follows:

> Evaluation refers to the act of ascribing worth or merit to the results of an information-gathering procedure (such as assigning grades on a test). Assessment is much broader; it refers to a planned process for gathering and synthesizing information relevant to the purposes of discovering and documenting students’ strengths and weaknesses, planning and enhancing an instruction that is appropriate given the student’s learning needs, or making recommendations related to educational goals for the student.

Black and Wiliam are often cited with regards to formative assessment. Their article “Inside the Black Box-Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment” (1998) has been pivotal for debating formative assessment within education worldwide.

In the paper, Black & Wiliam argue that far too often responsibility for learning is put on teachers only. They argue that teaching and learning have to be interactive. “Teachers need to know about their pupils’ progress and difficulties with learning so that they can adapt their work to meet their needs. Needs which are often unpredictable and which vary from one pupil to another” (p. 2). In order to deal with this, they envisage the use of formative assessment and they stress the weight of feedback.

The message that Black & Wiliam want to convey is that feedback becomes quintessential: “feedback to any pupil should be about the particular qualities of his or her work, with advice on what he or she can do to improve, and should avoid comparisons with other pupils” (p. 6). However, it would be limiting to assume that feedback alone is the bearer of all results, Black & Wiliam suggest that pupils’ self-assessment is to be considered as imperative as feedback.
Self-assessment and peer-evaluation are seen as two pillars within formative assessment. However, these are tools that pupils need to practice. Black & Wiliam emphasize that only when pupils overcome the pattern of passive reception, i.e. “being accustomed to receiving classroom teaching as an arbitrary sequence of exercises with no overarching rationale” (p. 7), they are likely to become more committed and more effective as learners. In conclusion Black & Wiliam claim that “for formative assessment to be productive, pupils should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve” (p. 7).

3.4 The King’s Mersey Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project

Formative assessment was largely studied in the King’s Mersey Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP) in the year 2000. The research of Black & Wiliam went further and resulted in the book Assessment for Learning published in 2003 where the results of the KMOFAP were discussed and analyzed.

The two researchers of the Assessment Reform Group cooperated during a two-year period with 48 teachers who were asked to consider a change in their praxis with regards to questioning, feedback, sharing criteria and self-assessment. In the project, teachers were also asked to consider the use of feedback via comments, peer-assessment and self-assessment and the formative use of summative tests while assessing pupils.

As Black et al (2003) point out, “The KMOFAP set out to help teachers transform the formative assessment ideas gleaned from research studies into working practice in the classroom” (p. 30).

The four prominent areas within formative practice will now be looked upon closely.

3.4.1 Questioning
As far as questioning is concerned, teachers were asked to bear in mind the results of Rowe (1974) on increasing the wait time within the classroom discourse. Allowing extra time lead
to the following: answers were longer, failure to respond decreased, responses were more confident, students challenged and/or improved the answers of the other students, more alternative explanations were offered. The teachers of the KMOFAP tried to apply wait time; however, they found it problematic in the beginning. As Black et al point out, “to begin with the teachers were unable to increase their wait time above a few seconds and talked of ‘unbearable silences’” (p. 33). Despite the initial worries however, teachers came to the conclusion that increasing the wait time lead to more students being involved. “One particular way to increase participation is to ask students to brainstorm ideas, perhaps in pairs, for two to three minutes before the teacher asks for contributions” (p. 35). As Black et al indicate several times in the course of their publication, formative assessment is a practice where teachers need to take risks and deviate from established routines in classroom. These risks are for instance the ones concerning the will of changing the status quo in the question-answer practice.

### 3.4.2 Feedback

The second area in which the KMOFAP developed formative practices concerned feedback. According to Black et al, “an essential part of formative assessment is feedback to the learner, both to assess their current achievement and to indicate what the next steps in their learning trajectory should be” (p. 42). Interestingly, the teachers participating in the project took inspiration from a study conducted by Ruth Butler in 1988. Butler was interested in the feedback that pupils received on their written work. She conducted her study by offering three different types of feedback: marks, comments, combination of marks and comments. The latter method was widely spread in the UK amongst teachers. However, it was remarkable that “the study showed that learning gains were greatest for the group given only comments, with the other two treatments showing no gains” (p. 43).

The study showed however that some teachers were skeptical to use comments only. The reluctance was partly justified and expressed in these words: “students rarely read comments, preferring to compare marks with peers as their first reaction on getting work back” (p. 43).

Nonetheless teachers managed to use feedback differently in the classrooms, “it involved finding the best way to communicate to the learners about what they had achieved and what they needed to work on next” (p. 43). The pupils, on the other hand, had some initial unwillingness on receiving feedback by comments only. They wanted guarantees in return,
namely that teachers would not use red pens, that they wrote comments that were legible, that they would write comments that could be understood.

However, results were encouraging as pupils started to understand that “feedback given as rewards or grades enhances ego rather than task involvement” (p. 44). The fundamental point raised by Black et al is that feedback that focuses on what needs to be done can encourage all to believe that they can improve, “Such feedback can enhance learning, both directly through the effort that can ensue and indirectly by supporting the motivation to invest such effort” (p. 46).

Most significantly, the conclusion that Black et al want to convey is that “A culture of success should be promoted where every student can make achievements by building on their previous performance, rather than by being compared with others” (p. 46).

3.4.3 Peer-assessment and self-assessment
The third area towards formative practice within KMOFAP was peer-assessment and self-assessment. As Black et al assert, “It is very difficult for students to achieve a learning goal unless they understand that goal and can assess what they need to do to reach it. So self-assessment is essential to learning” (p. 49). One effective way for raising awareness on pupils’ own learning capabilities is the use of peer-assessment. In fact, as Black et al point out, there is a fundamental factor that speaks in favor of this claim, namely “the interchange in peers’ discussions is in language that students themselves would naturally use” (p. 50). Another advantage while students engage in peer-assessment is that “when students are busy, involved in peer-assessment in the classroom, the teacher can be free to observe and reflect on what is happening and to frame helpful interventions” (p. 50).

3.4.4 Formative use of summative tests
The fourth and perhaps most controversial area of formative practice within the KMOFAP, was the use of summative tests in the formative work. Although the researchers “tried to encourage teachers to steer clear of summative assessment […] because of the negative influences of summative pressure” (p. 53), the result of the study showed that teachers could not accept such advice because their reality was that formative assessment had to work alongside summative assessment.
A further innovation suggested by the study of King and Foos et al (as quoted in Black et al, 2003), was that “students that trained to prepare for examinations by generating and then answering their own questions outperformed comparable groups who prepared in conventional ways” (p. 54). This was also a feature of peer-assessment group strategy applied to the use of summative tests within the formative work.

The results presented by the KMOFAP showed that “summative tests should be, and should be seen to be, a positive part of the learning process. Such tests should be used to chart learning occasionally rather than dominate the assessment picture for both teachers and students” (p. 56).
4 Method

This degree project has been carried out using principles of the case study method. However, I feel obliged to mention that I did not manage to gather richer and extensive data in a prolonged period of time, to the amount that case studies would require. Therefore, the label “case study” in this degree project refers essentially to an object being investigated, namely KSG.

Due to time restrictions and given the school location, it seemed evident that the intention of carrying out an extensive case-study would be problematic. In addition, case studies would require observations alongside interviewing and subsequently the use of “triangulation”. Observations, due to the reasons stated previously, were never used in this degree project.

In this particular case, the primary source of data was obtained by interviewing. Since the aim of the degree project was to gather an understanding of formative assessment and the way it is experienced by pupils and teachers at KSG, the qualitative method of interviewing was adopted. Semi-structured interview questions, for the purpose stated above, were constructed.

4.1 Case study

As Heigham & Croker (2009) assert, “a simple definition of a case study is elusive” (p. 68). In claiming this, they mean that it is obligatory to look into the concept of “boundedness” prior to describing what a case study is. According to Merriam (as quoted in Heigham & Croker, 2009), “a case is a bounded system or a defined, individual or entity (like a school, program, student, and institution) that the researcher wishes to explore” (p. 68). Yin, as also quoted in Heigham & Croker (2009), defines case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries and contexts are not clearly evident” (p. 68). Bearing this in mind, Heigham & Croker argue that the dilemma for the person or group that wishes to use this method would be “how is a researcher to determine these boundaries?” (p. 68). In order to answer this
question, Heigham & Croker point out that it is necessary to gain an understanding of what a bounded system is. Such a system is “composed of an individual (or institution) and a site, including the contextual features that inform the relationship between the two” (p. 68).

Since the aim of this degree project was to gain an understanding of how formative assessment is experienced at *KSG* by both teachers and pupils, while not comparing the results obtained to other studies, the intrinsic case study method has been used. As a matter of fact, Stake (as quoted in Heigham & Croker, 2009) defines the intrinsic case study as a type of study: “in which interest lies purely in one particular case itself. There is no attempt at all to generalize from the case being studied, compare it to other cases, or claim that it illustrates a problem common to other, similar cases” (p. 70). To put this simply, Stake argues that “the emphasis is on gaining a deep understanding of the case itself” (p. 70). Intrinsic case studies differ from i.e. instrumental case studies in the sense that they require primarily a descriptive approach. According to Merriam (as quoted in Heigham & Croker, 2009) , both intrinsic and instrumental case studies “may lay the groundwork for future studies, by providing basic information about the realms in which little research has been conducted” (p. 70).

Burtlet and Burton (2007) mention that case studies can be conducted adopting several methods. These might be qualitative and quantitative. In this particular case a qualitative research method was used.

As Heigham & Croker (2009) assert, “qualitative research is an umbrella term used to refer to a complex and evolving research methodology” (p. 5). Qualitative research, in its turn, can adopt different research approaches. “These approaches use a wide variety of data collection methods, such as observations, interviews, open-response questionnaire items, verbal reports, diaries and discourse analysis” (p.5).

As Croker put it: “qualitative researchers believe that meaning is socially constructed” (p. 7), hence he argues that “focus is put on participants, how participants experience and interact with a phenomenon at a given point in time and a particular context” (p. 7). In this degree project, the phenomenon is obviously the experiencing of formative assessment by both teachers and pupils in a particular school. Croker explains that “qualitative researchers […] are interested in the ordinary, everyday worlds of their participants- where they live, work and study” (p. 6). As a matter of fact, particular relevance is given to the “participants’ natural
settings” (p. 8). These settings are “complex, dynamic and multifaceted” (p. 7) as Croker explains. Moreover, Croker asserts that “qualitative researchers focus on understanding the process of what is going on in a setting” (p. 8).

### 4.2 Interviews

In this particular case study, data was collected using interviewing. A definition of interviewing can be read in Hatch (2002): “Qualitative interviews are special kinds of conversations or speech events that are used by researchers to explore informants’ experiences and interpretations” (p. 91). Hatch mentions three kinds of qualitative interviews: informal, formal and standardized. Informal interviews are unstructured conversations that are not primary sources of data. They serve as a complement to observation studies.

Hatch explains that formal interviews, “are sometimes called ‘structured’, ‘semi structured’, or ‘in-depth interviews” (p. 94). They are “structured” since the researcher is in charge of leading interviews, set time frames for them and these are often recorded on tape.

According to Hatch, standardized interviews are similar to open ended questionnaires, where “the researchers enter the interview setting with predetermined questions that are asked in the same order, using the same words, to all informants” (p. 95). The aim is to gather data that can be compared systematically.

As mentioned earlier, “semi structured” interviews were carried out in order to explore the experiencing of formative assessment at KSG. Hatch labels as “semi structured” those interviews where “researchers are open to following the leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during interview interactions” (p. 94). This, he argues, is done “although the researcher comes to the interview with guiding questions” (p. 94).

Hatch argues that qualitative researchers seek to capture participants’ perspectives, so interview questions need to be open-ended. They should be “designed to get informants talking about their experiences and understandings” (p. 102). Since I aimed at investigating
my participants’ experiences and understandings I believe that this was the appropriate method for me to use.

As for any research method, the use of interviews has pros and cons. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), there are several advantages while using interviews as data gathering method. They argue that interviewing yields rich data, details and new insights which in its turn allow respondents to describe what is meaningful or important to them using their own words. Other advantages in using interviews are that the researcher is provided by direct feedback from the interviewee, that the researcher can establish a personal interaction with the respondents and that the topics can be explored in depth. Moreover, while interviewing, the researcher is provided by a flexibility which can lead to explore unintended ideas or themes.

As for disadvantages, Kvale and Brinkmann mention the fact that interviews might be time consuming. Bearing this in mind, they list seven stages necessary when using interviews as a qualitative method: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying and reporting. Moreover, since interviews tend to produce a lot of data, some of it being the unintended ideas or themes previously mentioned, the analysis of it can be problematic and could result in adding unexpected extra time to the researchers’ schedule.

As for the interview schedule, I opted for semi-structured interviews, which means that I had pre-prepared questions prior to meet my informants. Questions were open-ended and guidance was provided when necessary. I followed one of the recommendations in Hatch (2002) and I entered the interviews with guiding questions and I was prepared “to follow the leads that are generated in the interview context” (p. 101). In addition, I started each interview with an ice breaker, as Hatch suggests, in order to make participants feel at ease.

The interviews were conducted in the building, hence in the school’s natural environment. I obtained permission to use the name of the school by head teacher Lena de Bruin, who had no objection to having her name cited in this degree project. The language used while interviewing was Swedish. Interviews were recorded on a digital voice-recorder and notes were taken during the interviewing procedure as well. Interview transcripts are held by the researcher.
4.4 Selection and ethical considerations

Two teachers and two pupils volunteered to participate in this degree project. The choice of interviewing one teacher of English and one teacher of Swedish (as major subjects) was to present a broader spectrum of how formative assessment is used and experienced in two core subjects.

Pupils were selected randomly by the two teachers. They were clearly informed what the degree project aimed at exploring. Both were content with the explanation and gave their permission to serve as participants. Given that they were both eighteen years of age, no legal need to inform their parents was required. Prior to commencing the interview, I stated that their anonymity would be preserved. As a matter of fact, while recording the interviews, both pupils and teachers were never addressed by their names. The pupils, on the other hand, were only asked to answer the questions “how old they were and where they lived”. With regards to the second question, the pupils were only to give a time perspective, namely how long it took them to commute to school. “An ethical imperative” Hatch argues, “is protecting the feelings of those who have given themselves to any project” (p. 94).

As Hatch (2002) points out, “qualitative researchers doing research in education contexts have special ethical responsibilities when the participants in their studies are students and teachers” (p. 67). “Students”, Hatch explains, “are especially vulnerable to exploitation because of their youth and their positioning as a kind of captive audience in the school” (p. 67).
5 Results

This chapter presents the results from the interviews with the two teachers and the two pupils. All of the participants are given fictional names in order to protect their privacy.

5.1 The pupils

The pupils interviewed (appendix 1) will be referred to as Monica and Rachel; they are both eighteen years of age and study the Social Science program. They attend different classes, having chosen different orientations. They had been assessed formatively for the entire spring term of 2010 in a series of subjects.

As an ice-breaker, the interview started by asking both Monica and Rachel how distant they lived in relation to the school location. They were also asked if they have experienced any problems while commuting to KSG. Both lived approximately half an hour away from school and pointed out that, apart from harsh winters, when the whole “traffic system collapses” (Rachel’s own words), no significant delays or problems were or are encountered. In other words, commuting to school has never been a major trouble; hence their attendance has never been jeopardized by traffic.

Subsequently, the question “how long have you studied English?” was posed; Monica seemed a bit uncertain and answered that she could not remember exactly,” perhaps from the second or the third grade” . Rachel, on the other hand, attended an International school throughout all of her education, apart from kindergarten.

Thirdly, both pupils were asked to describe in their own words what formative assessment was for them.

Monica answered the following: “it is a great way, a gentle way of being assessed”, when I asked her to explain herself in a more concrete manner she claimed the following: “formative
assessment is probably when you write essays and you get them back with comments on”. Monica felt the need to point out that “formative assessment is when you get other comrades’ points of view (meaning peer-response) and reflections on what you have written”. Rachel answered with a similar example, namely “when you write essays and you get feedback by the teacher, not just a grade”.

The next question aimed to explore in which ways pupils worked with formative assessment. It became evident that this was done mainly in essays or reports. Written production, in other words, was mainly assessed formatively. Monica added that the class was given feedback on oral presentations (such as PowerPoint ones) as well. As for other subjects assessed with the formative principle, history, Swedish, civics, and Spanish were listed.

Monica mentioned that it “wasn’t easy in the beginning” due to her aversion of getting feedback from “pupils who sometimes know worse English than I do”. However, she was enthusiastic when working with someone who was “at her own level or even better” during the peer-assessment phase. It seemed clear that “who was giving who feedback” was critical for her attitude towards formative assessment, especially at the peer level.

As the interview proceeded, Monica started to talk freely about some of the beneficial issues of formative assessment that she had noticed in class. Generally her attitude was positive. She mentioned that especially some of the “weak pupils” benefited from this type of assessment. In her own words she explained that these peers “may need someone else that tells them what is wrong, instead of the teacher, someone who can explain stuff in simpler words”. Continuing on the same topic, she felt that some pupils “could experience a sort of strictness when assessed by teachers only”, hence experiencing formative assessment in an ineffective manner. Although generally positively received, peer-assessment sometimes was perceived as frustrating when “pupils were unable to provide answers or solutions to one another”, also, she argued that “sometimes you feel a bit stupid or worse since you cannot help them as you wished”. Finally, she could mention an episode where “pupils were mean to each other and instead of giving each other constructive criticism, they only engaged themselves in evil comments”.

Rachel mentioned that formative assessment was a positive method while working with essays. She could pinpoint that “it is really nice to have the ability to re-write things instead of
only getting a grade and that’s over”. By that she meant that she experienced “the second chance” as a constructive way of improving her own writing. She did not talk about peer-assessment to the same extent that Monica did, which made me believe that in her class, peer-assessment was not broadly adopted. “The few times we did peer-assess one another” she said “it was the teacher who set up couples, and she (the teacher) knew what she was doing!” As far as I understood, the teacher had a precise idea of who was to assess whom. The conflict that Monica was talking about earlier on, being assessed by some “unwanted” peer, seemed not to exist in Rachel’s class. As a final thought regarding peer-assessment, Rachel raised the issue of the varying level of ambition and motivation in the class: “Some pupils aren’t really motivated and they don’t really get involved while receiving feedback. It seems that they only are happy if they get a G”.

Rachel focused on the role of the teacher as feedback messenger: she felt that through comments she could take an active role in the development of her writing skills. She added that “it is sometimes hard to check and find out what the teacher means by ‘word order’, but, at the same time it gives me the possibility to find out things on my own”. “You feel great when you crack the code!” she added enthusiastically. At this stage, both pupils were asked how they were given practical feedback by their teachers. Unanimously they answered that this was done via short written comments on what to improve. They mentioned that very rarely the teacher corrected a misspelled word for example. Often, the teacher mostly wrote either “spelling” or “check the spelling” next to the word in question. When it came to verbs for instance, a note with a simple “tense” or “agreement” was written in order for the pupils to identify and provide correction.

A follow-up question was posed, trying to establish whether the pupils preferred to be assessed formatively rather than summatively. Monica argued that “it is nice to just get a grade so that you can concentrate on other things”. However, after a long pause, she reflected back on her answer and claimed that “the good thing is that I get the possibility of developing my writing and be aware of the careless mistakes I have made when I get comments by the teacher”. Rachel had only positive comments with regards to this issue: she claimed that “I have learned a lot through formative assessment, my grammar has improved a lot since I need to actively got back to it and check what I have written wrong”.

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With regards to the use of rubrics, Monica thought that they provided her with a visual aid which helped her in the process of understanding “where she was and what she needed to do to get a better grade”. She was also content to have rubrics sheets with her at all times so that “she skipped thinking of where to find them”. “The positive thing with rubrics is that you have them there, in a concrete form” she added.

Rachel found that “it is nice to have both goals to attain and grading criteria in the same sheet”. Also, she added the following: “rubrics have helped me to understand that there are gaps between grades and that I need to work with this if I want to achieve a good grade”.

In conclusion, both pupils were positive about using rubrics in the formative process. They could not express any more detailed information on how they were affected by the use of it, as Rachel put it: “you get used to it in the end”.

5.2 The teachers

The teachers interviewed will be referred to as Denise and Malin (appendix 2). Denise started her teaching career in 2003, her major subject being English. Malin has been teaching since 1999 and her main subject is Swedish. In order to protect the privacy of the two, I will not mention which minor subjects they teach. On the other hand I will refer to their second subject as the “minor”.

I started the interview by asking the teachers to provide their own definition of both formative approach and subsequently formative assessment.

With regards to the first question, Denise answered that formative approach could be seen as a “way to raise consciousness in pupils to develop their potential, to pinpoint deficiencies, to work ahead and to provide them with a ‘red thread’”. In addition, Denise pointed out that the formative approach should be based on “being aware, as a teacher, of the pupils’ different levels of knowledge in order to provide them with the right guidance towards development”.

Malin claimed that formative approach is a “process of development, where the concept of process is equally important as the concept of development”. Moreover, she pointed out in a concrete manner that formative approach is when “we give pupils the possibility to achieve or
score higher during the whole course instead of just assigning them a grade thus blocking their potentials”.

With reference to the second question, Denise argued that formative assessment could be summarized as “when teachers assess pupils checking criteria and goals to attain and provide pupils with the information on what they have achieved and what they can do in order to achieve a higher grade”. She added an emotional aspect to her concept of formative assessment, that is to say “when pupils are given the possibility to express whether they are satisfied with what they have achieved and if not, to have a discussion that leads pupils in the right direction, being happy that is”. Malin expressed her vision of formative assessment as “the process when pupils do work actively in the correction of their mistakes, when teachers give feedback on what to search for to facilitate correction of these without spoon feeding corrected items”. Malin felt the need to add that “formative assessment does not necessarily have to exclude summative assessments sometimes”. In addition, she mentioned that when using summative assessments, it is of paramount importance that pupils understand that “this is not the grade that you will get at the completion of the course”.

**5.2.1 Implementing formative assessment**

After having established these grounds, the interview proceeded by asking the participants the reason why they had chosen to work actively with formative assessment.

Denise argued that “the curriculum wants us to”, meaning that “we are obliged, essentially, to tell pupils where they are in their process of learning”. She even added that it is “more fun to work this way!”. When I asked her to develop her answer, she observed that “when pupils foresee their progression, they seem happier, hence I am happy” Malin answered that in her opinion “roughly all of the language teachers adopt formative assessment at some stage”. She felt that she was no exception to this rule of thumb, and, in addition, she argued that she could not provide a more distinct answer to her claim. Also, she firmly believes that “knowledge is created while interacting with others by means of discussion”, using formative assessment as a tool.

With reference to how formative assessment was implemented at KSG, a question divided into three categories was posed, namely “how do you work with formative assessment in a)
whole class b) smaller groups c) on an individual basis.” Both teachers answered that they used the peer-assessment method extensively, followed up by discussions at whole class level. It is obligatory to state at this point that when teachers were referring to peer-assessment, they were considering mainly the pupils’ written production.

Both teachers stated that in the beginning some pupils felt reluctant to use peer-assessment. Denise pointed out the fact that a number of pupils were not at all comfortable in having their texts read and commented upon by other pupils. She explained that pupils “thought it was embarrassing and could not carry out peer-assessment in an effective manner”. Some pupils “weren’t willing to provide authentic feedback” and were happy to categorize their peers’ texts as “good”, in order not to hurt them. Denise felt the need to tell her pupils that this attitude would endanger the whole idea of helping each other; as a matter of fact she claimed that “it is worse to provide pupils with unauthentic feedback than risking to hurt them”.

As for practical examples of implementing formative assessment at classroom level, Denise explained that she used the seminar form. According to this, pupils were asked to read aloud their essays and consequently the whole class was asked to provide oral feedback to the pupil reading/presenting. To support this, the class was given rubrics in order to seek relevant pin-pointers on what to give feedback to. Denise claimed that pupils, trained in the use of rubrics, knew precisely what to comment on. Malin, on the other hand, did not use the public display of texts. She focused more on using peer-assessment in class so that she could free some valuable time and circulate amongst pupils instead, offering pupils a more tutorial role.

When investigating the implementation of formative assessment in smaller groups, Denise mentioned the weight of discussions as a tool. The example she provided was that when pupils were scrutinizing old samples of National tests, these groups engaged in discussions concerning grading criteria for these. Alongside rubrics sheet, Denise let pupils discuss freely what objectives seemed to be achievable and how. Malin used discussions as well. In addition, she trained pupils in using open questions when discussing pupils’ texts. One of the questions was “what if you were to look at this issue/ idea from another perspective?” In addition, she brought up an example where pupils were encouraged to translate in “their own words” different grading criteria and to explain them to one another prior to be presented with a written task.
With regards to how teachers used formative assessment on an individual basis, both Denise and Malin mentioned continuous dialogue with the pupil supported by the use of rubrics. Malin added that “pupils have different demands” while receiving the teacher’s feedback. “Some are content with a few comments, some want to know every tiny detail that is problematic when getting back papers”. Bearing this in mind, the question “what do you usually comment on, respectively you do not comment on while providing feedback to pupils?” was posed to both teachers. Denise explained that she looked at both form and grammar. With regards to form and content she would refer to what was stated in the rubrics. As for grammar, she would underline the word or sentence in question and a comment such as “vocabulary”, “tense” or “word order” would appear on top of these. Denise worked likewise in Swedish. Both agreed that a word that was misspelled which in its turn did not disrupt the fluency of the text, was a typical example of what they did not usually comment. When giving feedback to oral presentation, Denise added that something she often did comment on was the pupils’ lack of consistency in their chosen English dialect, either AE or BE. Also, the distinction between “have” / “has” was a constant feature in her feedback.

5.2.2 Pros and cons of formative assessment
The pros and cons while working formatively were also discussed. Denise argued that she was unable to provide these directly, on the other hand she stated the following: “I think that I have worked formatively my entire career although I never had the word for it”, “this is probably a pro in itself”. She mentioned that occasionally, the lack of time at her disposal did prevent her from offering as much feedback as she wanted to provide. Lack of time was also mentioned by Malin. She explained that in her “minor”, pupils were allowed to express this mathematically, the equivalent of 2 minutes per week. On the other hand, formative assessment she claimed “has enriched me as a teacher”. “I learn new things everyday; I am pleased that pupils often surprise me with their own achievements”. “I learned, working with this method, that I never should underestimate pupils” she added.

Both teachers expressed that the choice of assessing pupils in this manner resulted in some initial reluctance. Denise argued that “perhaps, pupils were never encouraged during nine years at compulsory school in thinking formatively”. She claimed that far too many pupils were “indoctrinated by summative tests as the only way to achieve a grade”. Malin stated that “some pupils found it shocking that they were not given a grade on a test/paper and raised their eyebrows when, searching for a grade, they found only a comment there instead”. 
However, she proceeded, “pupils are quite sharp at translating comments back into grades” “that is to say that when I write for example ‘excellent analysis’, in actual fact I mean MVG”. Lastly, the question posed was: “how do you experience the fact that you work formatively for the entire course and in the end you are forced to submit a summative evaluation in form of a grade? What is your opinion on that?” Denise believed that it was not a major issue for her. The only trouble was to get pupils to understand the fact that “it is not the average sum of 14 different grades that grants you that grade in the end”. “What is important is the process” she argued. She also pointed out that during the course; pupils were always informed on roughly where they were in accordance to goals to attain and criteria, either orally or by checking their rubrics. Malin, along the same line, emphasized the question “how many times must I get that grade in order to get that grade in the end?” as typical of pupils who were not trained in formative assessment.

In conclusion, both teachers raised the problem that it felt fundamental for them to steer pupils away from the “summative thinking as a platform for grading alone”. This process is not easy in the beginning as we have seen during the course of this degree project. A solution was not presented here, however both teachers believed that their attempt towards formative thinking began to give its fruits, even among disinclined pupils.
6 Discussion

The aim of this degree project was to gain an understanding of how formative assessment is experienced at KSG both from a student perspective and from a teacher perspective. In this chapter, the experiencing of formative assessment at KSG will be discussed. Firstly the students’ perspective will be analyzed. Secondly, the teachers’ perspective will be looked at.

6.1 Pupils’ understanding of formative assessment

While writing this degree-project, several questions regarding formative assessment were raised. Curiously, even though both pupils were assessed formatively for the whole spring term of 2010, they were not able to provide a definition of formative assessment. They could, on the other hand, relate the concept of formative assessment to practical issues such as feedback in the form of peer-response and in the quality of the comments received by their teachers.

One of the research questions for this degree project was: “how do pupils experience their learning with formative assessment?” Generally, formative assessment was experienced positively, although the process of implementation was not a simple task. As the results of the interviews pointed out, two issues seemed more evident than others, namely: the reactions on feedback received (by teachers and peers) and the pupils’ own feelings towards the idea of being assessed formatively. The practice of self-assessment was never mentioned by the pupils. According to Andrade (2010), “self-assessment is a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on the quality of their work, judge the degree to which it reflects explicitly stated goals or criteria, and revise accordingly” (p. 92). As seen in chapter 3.4.3, Black et al refer to “self-assessment” as “essential to learning”. It was therefore a surprise that this concept was never cited.

With reference to feedback received by their teachers, one major finding was that the use of formative assessment seemed to have increased the pupils’ learning awareness. As the term
suggests, “learner awareness” refers to how students should be made aware of their learning capabilities. In order for the pupil to achieve this, the role of the teacher is fundamental. Comments such as “word order”, “tense” or “vocabulary” provided by the teacher in a formative discourse, would function as indicators that certain areas of grammar or form would need rectification. These comments, as we have seen with the interviewees, triggered the pupils to return to their texts and provide correction, thus raising awareness.

This practice however, was not experienced positively, at least in the beginning. As Rachel pointed out, “it is sometimes hard to check and find out what the teacher means by ‘word order’, but, at the same time it gives me the possibility to find out things on my own”. This would lead me to believe that a certain amount of skepticism was experienced by the pupil. However, after the initial reluctance, the pupil experienced this way of learning as constructive.

6.2 Raising learner awareness

Learner awareness and learner responsibility are two concepts that overlap each other. In this case, pupils were invited to take responsibility for their own written and oral productions. Peñaflorida (as quoted in Richards and Renandya, 2002, p. 345), asserts that teachers “need to make their students realize that their paper is their own property […] a paper which is excessively marked and scribbled over by the teacher is no longer the student’s property. It becomes the teacher’s”. Bearing this in mind, the pupils at KSG seemed to have benefited from short comments that were not invasive and aimed at targeting possible solutions rather than only providing correction.

The concept of learner awareness runs parallel to the concept of learner autonomy. It seemed evident that the pupils understood that responsibility for correction, thus learning, was passed to them. According to Lundahl (2009), “när eleverna funderar över sitt lärande, kan de bli medvetna om vilka alternativ som finns och kan därför fatta välövervägda beslut. Men det förutsätter att eleverna inser att inlärningsansvaret till stor del är deras eget” (p. 308). However it is difficult to argue to what extent formative assessment was responsible for this. The pupils seemed to have appreciated feedback that aimed at raising consciousness for their
own learning. Having said that, this procedure was not immediately experienced as positive in the beginning as we have seen from the results. Monica seemed doubtful to receive feedback by comments only. As she commented, “it is nice to just get a grade so that you can concentrate on other things”. However, as she became more confident with this type of assessment, she could express positive comments on formative assessment.

Different opinions were raised with regards to being assessed by their peers. Significantly, one of the two pupils commented on the role of motivation while receiving feedback: “Some pupils aren’t really motivated and they don’t really get involved while receiving feedback”. It seems that they only are happy if they get a G”. Dörney (2001) defines motivation as an umbrella term that covers a variety of meanings where “conative”, “cognitive” and “affective” functions are associated to the human mind (p. 2). Different pupils have different levels of motivation depending on which subject they study. As Dörney (2001) argues, “it is highly unlikely that everybody can be motivated to learn everything and even generally motivated students are not equally keen on every subject matter” (p. 25). In addition, advantages and disadvantages of peer-response were also discussed by the pupils. According to Toppings (2010), “both assessors and assessees can experience initial anxiety about the peer assessment process” (p. 67); this was also confirmed by the results. One of the pupils in fact, expressed disbelief towards peer-assessment if her text was to be read by a pupil “who knew worse English than her”. However, she was content when she could get feedback from a more competent student. As Toppings (2010) put it, “social processes can influence and contaminate the reliability and validity of peer assessments” (p. 67).

One of the principal issues for this degree project was to find out emotional reactions from the pupils while being assessed formatively. It seemed evident that the implementation of formative assessment was not a simple task. Pupils seemed disorientated in the beginning. The idea of being assessed mainly formatively rather than summatively, contributed towards this state of mind. It was therefore of utter importance that teachers started to look at alternative ways in order to assess pupils. In a way, KSG wanted to steer away from traditional forms of assessment in order to maximize learning and create a culture of success in the classroom. Stiggins (as quoted in McMillan, 2007,) argues that, in the past, “the threat of pending summative assessment” (p. 11) was a tool for teachers to maximize anxiety in students in order for them to study more, hence to learn. This way of thinking was not perceived at KSG during the course of my research. What seemed evident was that pupils
needed to gain confidence in the change of praxis that teachers adopted at KSG. The pupils’ initial skepticism was steered away by the commitment of the teachers. Although at times perceived as difficult, formative assessment was welcomed by both pupils. As mentioned earlier, much of the skepticism that the pupils felt in the beginning was due their previous experience of established evaluation/assessment forms which were mainly of a summative nature.

In conclusion, it seemed evident that pupils understood why they were working with formative assessment and what possible outcomes could derive from it. As Stiggins put it, “pupils must not wonder whether they will succeed, only when” (p. 15).

6.3 The teachers’ attitude towards formative assessment

The other research question for this degree project was: “how do teachers experience their work with formative assessment?” The general conclusion can be summarized as positive. As evinced from the results, both teachers were keen on using formative assessment in their subjects. Rather interestingly, neither Malin nor Denise ever mentioned the fact that the choice of adopting formative assessment was a decision taken “top-down”. I was therefore surprised that neither teacher mentioned the piloting project as one of the reasons behind their choice. On the contrary, Denise was aware that the purpose of working formatively is an issue promoted by the curriculum. As a matter of fact, when she was asked why she adopted formative assessment, she claimed the following: “because the curriculum wants us to”. In Lpf 94 it is clearly stated that “the teacher shall on a continuous basis give all pupils information on what is needed for development and success in studies” (p. 17). Malin claimed that formative assessment is almost a natural alternative for language teachers.

One issue that often is debated when implementing formative assessment is “teacher change”. Black et al (2010) assert that implementing assessment for learning requires personal change, hence “changing the way the teachers think about their teaching and their view and their role as a teacher” (p. 80). It can be discussed here that the teachers’ results would not necessarily point to the statement above. The results would suggest that the teachers did not have to “reinvent their teaching” in order to adopt formative assessment in their didactical work. As a
matter of fact, Denise claimed that “I think that I have worked formatively my entire career although I never had the word for it”. This would point to the conclusion that formative assessment can be integrated naturally. With regards to “teacher change” however, the results were not able to provide information of how teachers did organize their lessons or if they had to change their teaching at all. Although both teachers worked in similar ways, the results gave an indication that the use of formative assessment did differ from teacher to teacher.

Commonly, both Denise and Malin used peer-assessment, dialogues and discussions. However, the practice of peer-assessment was more Denise’s prerogative. What can be discussed further is to what extent the teachers’ personal pedagogical preferences might affect the quality of formative assessment. Considering the nature of this question, it would be unthinkable to provide a solution here. Such a question, on the other hand, might serve as an inspiration for future studies.

6.4 Teacher change?

Black et al (2003) argue that any implementation of “teacher change” may result in being slow in pace (p. 13). Judging from the results of both teachers and pupils, KSG was no exception to this conclusion. Teachers and pupils were aware that this process would take time. Most importantly, teachers wanted to promote a culture where summative assessment could be integrated with formative assessment in a balancing way. As Black et al (2003) argue, “a numerical mark does not tell the student how to improve their work, so an opportunity to enhance their learning has been lost” (p. 46). Considering the above, it seemed evident that teachers wanted to break the circle of “summative thinking”, where common pupils’ belief was that “the average sum of different tasks would grant a grade at the completion of a course”. Teachers were attentive in promoting this fundamental message to pupils. As Denise pointed out: “it is not the average sum of 14 different grades that grants you that grade in the end”. Both teachers indicated that one of the major tasks while implementing formative assessment was the pupils’ uncertainty in changing assessment forms. Not surprisingly, Denise claimed that pupils were “indoctrinated by summative tests as the only way to achieve a grade”. It can be argued here that the reason behind this could
derive from the traditional psychometric use of assessment. As seen in chapter 3.1, Jönsson refers to this as a possible cause.

As mentioned earlier, one of the major findings while investigating the implementation of formative assessment at KSG was that this type of assessment contributed to raising learner awareness. As for the teachers, the use of formative assessment served a pedagogical purpose, namely in directing the pupils towards the development of their own learning. Learning theories will not be discussed in this chapter due to the vastity of the subject. However, when discussing formative assessment, constructivist theories cannot be left unmentioned. As Harlen put it, “Constructivists views of learning focus attention on the processes of learning and the learner’s role” (as quoted in Gardner, 2006, p. 68). The approach adopted by the teachers at KSG would apply to the statement above. Vygotsky (as quoted in Gardner, 2006) claims that learning is “by definition a social and collaborative activity in which people develop their thinking together” (p. 57), it was therefore not unexpected that Malin, one of the teachers, mentioned the fact that “knowledge is created while interacting with others by means of discussion”.

As we can gather from the results, the two teachers could provide suitable definitions of both formative approach and formative assessment. However, if we consider the KOMFAP as a reference for formative assessment implementation and theory, one interesting finding is worth discussing, namely the relative absence of self-assessment.

As we can read in chapter 6.1, the practice of self-assessment was never mentioned by the pupils. Surprisingly, this practice was never mentioned by teachers either. Black et al argue that self-assessment is an essential component in formative assessment. Why then neither teachers nor pupils mentioned this? The results only indicate that pupils became aware of the areas that needed improvement when guided by the comments of their teachers and, to some extent, to the practice of peer-assessment. Due to the absence of data available with regards to self-assessment, a conclusion cannot be drawn here.

The role of questioning, which according to the KMOFAP is of paramount importance in a formative context, was implicitly discussed in the results. Questioning per se however, was never mentioned. As seen in the results, Malin promoted the use of open-questions as a formative assessment tool while pupils were discussing in smaller groups. Unavoidably, discussions and dialogues imply the use of questioning. While pupils were providing each
other feedback, they were invited to use a language that they could relate to, nonetheless while formulating questions. As Malin suggested, such questions could be presented as follows: “what if you were to look at this issue/ idea from another perspective?”

A final thought worth discussing is the use of rubrics sheets. The results show that teachers and pupils at KSG were keen in using this tool in order to facilitate the understanding of goals and criteria. The experience of using such a tool was perceived as positive. Jönsson mentions “transparency” while using rubrics sheets in relation to objectives. Pupils were trained in understanding that “there are gaps between grading criteria”, as Rachel, one of the pupils, pointed out. Arter and McTighe (2001) make a distinction between holistic and analytical trait rubrics. A holistic rubric is based “on an overall impression of a student’s work” (p. 18), while an analytical trait rubric “divides a product or performance into essential traits or dimensions so that they can be judged separately” (p. 18). From the results however, it is not perceptible what types of rubrics were used at KSG.
7 Conclusion

I am aware of the limited size of my study. Bearing this in mind, I believe that I was however able to accomplish what I aimed for, namely gaining an understanding of teachers’ and pupils’ attitudes towards formative assessment. Of course, the trustworthiness of the results cannot be regarded as empirical, since this study was of a qualitative nature and relatively small. In addition, the results cannot be generalized and are mainly to be seen as inspirational for further studies.

The implementation of formative assessment at KSG is still a “work in progress”. Valuable data on pupils’ scoring results is still being collected. Although no statistics were provided in this degree project, a general feel of the experiencing of formative assessment can be evinced from the participants’ results. Black et al (2003) argue that “formative assessment is not at present a strong feature of classroom work” (p. 2), I was therefore pleased to investigate a reality that claims quite the opposite.

The investigation lifted a central issue in educational settings, namely that formative assessment can be a powerful tool towards raising learner awareness. To what extent the pupils succeeded with their grades is difficult to claim, however they seemed positive in adopting this practice after initial unwillingness. We must not forget however that these were the thoughts and feelings of two motivated pupils and formative assessment probably suited their needs. One has to keep in mind however that a student who lacks this motivation might need more support and feedback from the teacher. This requires of course additional time and enhanced teaching skills. Different pupils have different needs which, unequivocally, will demand different amount of support and different types of feedback. The question here is whether all schools in Sweden can meet such a demand.

Ideally, the curriculum recommends teachers to apply a balance of formative and summative assessment. This is something that the teachers at KSG implement on a daily basis. In the initial phase of implementation however, the pupils at KSG experienced a certain amount of unwillingness in embracing forms of assessment that deviated from the psychometric
tradition. Nevertheless, the commitment of the teachers managed to make pupils reconsider their assessment options. It is important that the school policy makers strive towards a common pedagogical praxis; providing those teachers who are not familiar with formative assessment with the support to be able to follow the recommendations above.

Researchers such as Jönsson would argue that traditional summative tests are still the norm in pupils’ minds. Adopting an alternative that promotes formative assessment is therefore a risk-taking action. Black et al argue that this action is worth taking though. The results, namely pupils’ achievements, might not appear immediately but they will be visible in the long run.

*KSG* is a school that believes in formative assessment practice as a complement to traditional assessment forms. As mentioned, the implementation of formative assessment at *KSG* was, and still is, a pilot project launched by the head teacher and a group of teachers who were interested in working with alternative forms of assessment as a complement to traditional forms of assessment. Like any change in praxis, this task was not unproblematic. At first, pupils did not seem convinced of how formative assessment could justify grades, since teachers wanted to steer away from summative thinking. Nevertheless, their skepticism was overcome by the commitment of the teachers who believed in this type of implementation. Moreover, teachers at *KSG* took an important step towards a new way of considering assessment *for* learning as a tool to promote pupils’ awareness of their learning potential. My findings point to the conclusion that the pilot-project at *KSG* has been successful so far. However, I am aware that more data needs to be analyzed in order to provide validity to my claim.
References:

Primary sources


Interviews with pupils at Klara Södra Gymnasium, Stockholm, 2010-10-12

Interviews with teachers at Klara Södra Gymnasium, Stockholm, 2010-10-13


Electronic sources

www.klaragymnasium.se/sodra

www.theducation.se

Secondary sources


Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview guide

Pupils

1. Hur långt har du till skolan?
2. Kan du berätta kort om dig och vad du läser för program här?
3. Hur länge har du läst engelska?
4. Kan du berätta med egna ord vad formativ bedömning är enligt dig?
5. På vilket sätt har ni jobbat med det i engelska?
6. På vilket sätt har ni jobbat med det i andra ämnen?
7. Hur upplever du det här sättet att arbeta i just engelska?
8. Hur upplever du det här sättet att bli bedömd i engelska?
9. Hur blir dina texter bedömda av din lärare?
10. Hur har du upplevt arbetssättet med matriser?
11. Hur upplever du feedback från klasskamrater?

Appendix 2

Interview guide

Teachers

1. Kan du berätta om din bakgrund som lärare?
2. Vad är formativt arbetssätt enligt dig?
3. Vad är formativt bedömning enligt dig?
4. Kan du ge exempel på hur du jobbar/ jobbat med det formativa arbetssättet i helklass?
5. Kan du ge exempel på hur du jobbar/ jobbat med det formativa arbetssättet i mindre grupper?
6. Kan du ge exempel på hur du jobbar/ jobbat med det formativa arbetssättet på individuell nivå?
7. Vilka faktorer tänker du på när du bedömer med det formativa tanke?
8. Vad brukar du kommentera respektive inte kommentera när du ger feedback?
9. Brukar du rätta felstavningar?
10. Hur upplever du det formativa arbetssättet, vilka fördelar respektive nackdelar ser du?
11. Kan du beskriva processen från formativ bedömning till summativ bedömning ur ditt eget perspektiv?