The Use of English in the Rap Program

Language Learning, Motivation and Personal Interests

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Abstract

This study investigates the view of some students and a teacher’s attitudes towards the learning possibilities of the integration of personal interests to the teaching of English. The research carried out at one of the largest profile schools in Sweden, with an aesthetic subject-orientation. These subjects are referred to as “passion subjects”. Qualitative interviews and observation were the methods used for data collection. The research questions were about students’ and teachers attitudes towards the involvement of their passion subject in the formal education process, as well as their views on integrating English as a foreign language in the teaching/learning process of their passion subject. The results show that the teacher and the students view the involvement of students’ personal interests in the formal education as a key source for motivation. Regarding the involvement of English as a foreign language in the passion subject, the results are both positive and negative: positive in the sense that it is viewed as getting extra lessons in English and negative in the sense that information can be overlooked as the students not always understand the input.

Keyword: motivation, passion subject, English as foreign language, English as second language, language acquisition, communicative language teaching, task based learning
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1. Introduction

Throughout the past few years it has become more accepted to integrate students’ personal interests in the educational process in order to promote and encourage learning. Personal interests can refer to sports, music, arts or anything else that students’ may engage in in their spare time. The Swedish curriculum for the secondary school system states that education should be adapted to each student’s conditions and that account should be taken of the varying circumstances, needs and knowledge of students (Skolverket, 2006). It is also stated that the school should make use of the knowledge and the experience that is available in the students’ surrounding environment and which the students may have acquired from what is referred to as “private” or “working life”. Hence the curriculum states that all students should be stimulated to develop in accordance with their own abilities (Skolverket, 2006).

What is identified in the curriculum for secondary school can be regarded as one of the reasons for new strategies and theories, which aim to integrate the students’ personal interests/strengths in the educational process. Several schools in Sweden have adapted these strategies and formed special educational programs that include students’ personal interests. One of the biggest so called “profile schools” in Sweden has focused on sports, music and the aesthetic interest of students and formed a curriculum according to this. Various sports programs and music programs are presented at this school. One of the most popular programs is the rap program. Students who are interested in producing rap music take rap as a subject and they spend several hours of the week on it, together with other compulsory subjects. Rap as a subject, as well as other sports- or aesthetic subjects, are referred to as “passion ämnen” (passion subjects). What differs between the rap program and other programs at the school is that all the rap lessons are in English. This means that the students who attend the rap program are taught in English, and naturally get to practice English more than other students at the school. As a result, the students have the possibility to integrate their real life experiences and preferences
in their education, as well as developing their qualifications in EFL due to the fact that all the teaching is held in English.

Dörnyei (2001) suggests that if teachers aim to motivate and encourage learners, they need to connect the learning process with activities that students already find interesting. He stresses the fact that learners need to relate to the content of the language they are learning and that they should be able to incorporate their own interests (2001, p. 53). According to the local curriculum at the school where this research was conducted, one of the reasons why the teaching at the rap program is in English depends on the history, culture and origins of rap music. It is essential to point out that rap music was born in the late 1970s in New York and as any other music genre it has its own style, culture and language. This can be linked to what Dörnyei (2001) has to say about languages being socially and culturally bound, and that their effective study requires a positive disposition towards everything that the language in question is associated with. Therefore the culture, the speakers and the influence of the language in question need to be considered (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 54).

Consequently, teachers may devote certain amount of class time in teaching a subject through a foreign language. This can be directly related to the foreign country or the subject, its history and cultural background. The teaching then has a dual role: to provide students with knowledge about the subject in question and to engage them in communication in the foreign language (Littlewood, 1981, p. 46).

According to what is stated in the Swedish curriculum for the non-compulsory school system, the local goals at the school in question and previous research, it is considered relevant to involve students’ personal interests in the educational process. Hence, it is of interest to me, as a future English teacher, to find out how this is felt by students in order to encourage and promote language learning.
1.1. Aim and research questions

The aim of this research is to investigate how some students and a teacher view the learning possibilities of the passion subject with regard to English. Consequently, to reach the study’s aim, the research questions are the following:

- According to some students and a teacher at the rap program, what are the positive and negative aspects of involving students’ personal interests in the formal education process?

- What are some students’ and teacher’s views on integrating EFL in the teaching/learning process of their passion subjects?
2. Background and terminology

The school in question stands out as one of the largest and most popular profiled schools in Sweden. It is located in one of the country’s biggest cities and it also incorporates a large youth center.

As mentioned before, the school has several programs associated with sports, music and aesthetics, but also a program which focuses on entrepreneurship. The sports programs consist of the basketball and the skateboard program and the music programs consist of the soul, rock, music production and rap program. These programs are referred to as “passion subjects”. The reason why the word passion is used is mainly because it is something that one feels strongly about and has an “aggressive”, active commitment to do. Students of this school are generally very passionate about their subjects and they usually audition for the school. This means that in the last year of compulsory school, students apply to this school. If the application goes through, they are called for an audition, regardless if it has to do with sports or music. During the auditions they need to demonstrate that they have basic skills within the field that they want to study. The music students need to show that they can sing, rap or produce music. The sport students go through physical tests first and afterwards they too are meant to demonstrate their skills within the specific field.

Previous to this research, I had a talk with one of the schools representatives who pointed out one of their main aims as being attractive for students who are not generally motivated for further studies. This statement was strengthened by conversation with students and teachers. They indicated that many of the students at the rap program have a tendency to be tired of school before starting at the rap program. They are in need of being motivated. However there are no statistics that indicates the validity of this.

The classes consist of 20-25 students. All compulsory subjects (Swedish, English and Mathematics) are studied within the class except the passion subjects. When having
their passion subject, the students are divided into. This means that in a class which consists of 20-25 students, three might have skateboard as their passion subject, five might have basketball, two might have rock and so on. The amount of students in the classes varies depending on what passion subject it is. In the rap classes there are approximately 5-7 students in every class, no matter if they are first, second or third year students. The majority of the students are boys. The students spend up to 12 hours every week on their passion subjects. In this research, I will use the term passion subject as a reference to the rap classes. All the teaching at the rap classes is in English. In very few cases the students are taught in Swedish. This is mainly when they have guest lecturers.

This research will also include discussions about the compulsory English subject which the students attend. The compulsory English subject will be referred to as compulsory English as foreign language classes (EFL).
3. Previous research

Much different research has been conducted on student motivation. As this research aims to investigate how the learning potentials of the passion subject in connection with English is perceived, it would be rather broad to include research on motivation alone. Therefore I have mainly chosen to study research which focuses on general aspects of motivation and language learning.

One previous research which does not have to do with language learning is interesting for my work because it deals with the combining of personal interests and the compulsory learning. Kretschmann (2010) stresses that increasing motivation towards learning by combining the enjoyable with the intended is an important educational perspective. His research shows that teachers of physical education (PE) should construct didactic settings that allow digital sports games. Teachers can then support the learning process by using digital sports games in PE classes by giving tasks in analyzing the variety of techniques and their structures, rules and their violations, or exploring successful tactic in the game. Another study indicates that the involvement of sports in the educational setting can increase the learning of a foreign language. McCall (2010) argues that French classrooms are by many considered to be a “feminine platform” in which boys feel less at home. Therefore a possible strategy for dealing with underachievement and lack of motivation in boys in general is to strive for a classroom, which is more convenient for boys. McCall suggests that one way to achieve this is by implementing “masculine” materials and resources, such as football. By doing so language learning can be connected to a topic that the students are interested in and which is relevant for them. This can lead to another question, which deals with gender roles. However what is interesting with McCall’s research is the fact that he suggests that students should be motivated with something that they can relate too, football in this case.
Dodson (2000) argues that drama has played a role in foreign language teaching in Britain and the United States since the 1970’s. Drama is a communicative language-learning technique and is student-centered and meaning-based. With theatre activities, students use language in a genuine way in a context that engages them. The research shows that most immediate benefit of using drama activities with English EFL students is that they acquire and practice new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Students are learning the language because they are practicing it with communicative activities in a real context. Salcedo (2010) mentions drama as a beneficial method for communicative language learning as well. However her research stresses music as a powerful tool. She argues that music can empower students with a real world communicative advantage and that implementing musical activities in the foreign language classroom is a successful method. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) portrays rap texts as literary texts which can be used to scaffold literary terms and concepts which could lead to literary interpretations. Learning by poetry and writing is also discussed by Wiseman (2011). Her research embraces the positive aspects of poetry workshops in an English classroom. Poetic devices such as rhyme, rhythm, similes and wordplay are identified as helpful tools in language practices.
4. Theoretical perspectives

In order to achieve the aim of this research I believe that a combination of theories will be advantageous. Therefore motivation, language acquisition, communicative language teaching and task based learning will function as an appropriate theoretical frame for this research.

4.1. Motivation

The term motivation is a suitable notion when talking about a concept that is important for all humans, but also very complex. Lightbown and Spada (2005) conclude that great deal of research has been conducted within this field. The overall findings show that positive attitudes and stimulus are related to success in second/foreign language learning (p. 56). Dörnyei (2001) describes motivation as why people decide to do something, how much effort they will put into it and for how long they are willing to do this (p. 7). Gardner (1985) argues that motivation is the engine driving the learning-system, which is defined by having a will to acquire a foreign language, conduct the tasks to reach the goals with enjoyment and put forward effort towards learning (p. 39). According to this descriptions, to be motivated must mean to have a driving force to achieve a goal.

Gardner (2001) also states that foreign language is not only a subject or an educational phenomenon, but also a cultural representation of the speakers of that language. Therefore teaching a foreign language can be regarded as implementing
elements of other cultures in to students’ lives. Meaning that in order to learn a foreign language (English in this case), students need to create and develop an “English” identity. Dörnyei (2001) extend this by suggesting various principles that are important for motivating language learners. Familiarizing the learners with the target language culture is one of the essential principles (p. 138).

4.2. Language acquisition

One of the most important facts highlighted by second language research is that progress does not only occur when one learns consciously. Progress also occurs as a result of subconscious and spontaneous mechanisms and behaviors. This happens when learners are involved in communication with the second or foreign language (Littlewood, 1984, p. 91). However it is important to point out that to learn a language and to acquire a language are two different things according to Krashen (1983). He defines acquisition as developing ability in a language by using it in natural and communicative settings. Learning a language means knowing the rules of it e.g. grammar (p. 18). A language is only acquired when one understands the message in the target language. One acquires by focusing on what is being said rather than how it is said. Simply, languages are acquired when used for communicating real life matters and ideas (Krashen, 1983, p. 19). Acquisition can thus be seen as the subconscious aspects of learning while learning refers to the conscious aspects (Littlewood, 1984).

Krashen (1985) shows that people acquire second or foreign languages only if they are exposed to comprehensible input and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input to be acquired (p. 4). To have a low affective filter means that the acquirer is more open to the input in the language. Meaning that the learning/acquisition environment is comfortable for a learner and the message which is being learned/acquired is interesting enough to pay attention to (Krashen, 1983, p. 38). When this filter is down and appropriate input is presented, acquisition is more or less unavoidable and unpreventable (Krashen, 1985, p. 4). The input is the message which is delivered to
the students via the teacher. If enough successful communication and meaningful interaction is taking place and if the students understand the message, there will be input at the “I + 1” level (Krashen and Terrell, 1983, p. 55). This means that the learner improves and progresses when foreign or second language input, which is one step beyond (+1) his or her current competence, is provided. So if a student is at level “I” acquisition occurs when he or she is exposed to comprehensible input which belongs to the “I + 1”. Thus comprehensible input will be the crucial element of language acquisition.

4.3. Communicative language teaching

As a result of Krashens theories, the concept of communicative language teaching (CLT) was developed by the Council of Europe in the late 1970s (Littlewood, 1981). One of the pioneers in the development of this approach is Joe Shiels. He argues that CLT is a learner-centered approach and it aims to make the learner interested by focusing on relevant themes (1988). It also gives the learner the possibility to choose among different texts and tasks in order to meet the aims of the syllabus. The idea is to develop the students’ communicative ability by involving them in meaningful, realistic and achievable goals (p. 2).

CLT emphasizes the development of the learners’ ability and willingness to use the target language in an appropriate way, in order to achieve effective communicative skills. Meaning that learning a language is a process that can mainly be achieved in an effective way by using the target language for the purpose of communication (Shiels, 1988, p. 139).

A communicative approach towards language learning opens up a wider perspective on language. Littlewood (1981) explains that CLT makes the learner consider language not only in terms of its structures (grammar and vocabulary), but also in terms of its communicative functions. By viewing language in this way, the learner does not only put focus on forms but also on what can be done with the forms (p. 10). However,
having knowledge of forms is important as it equips the learner with skills required for communication. These are referred to as “pre-communicative” tools and they help the learner to integrate the sub-skills into an effective system for communicating meanings (Littlewood, 1984, p. 92). In communicative activities, the learner has to activate his or her pre-communicative knowledge and skills in order to use them for communicative meanings (Littlewood, 1981, p. 86).

4.4. Task based learning

One of the main critiques towards communicative approaches is that they lack grammatical competence, which is necessary for mastering a language. Various solutions have been offered as a complement to CLT. One of them is task-based learning (TBL). TBL is activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose, in order to achieve an outcome. Harmer (2007) describes TBL as learning that occurs when the learner is focused on completing a task. Nunan (2006) agrees on this and continues with stressing the relevance of non-linguistic tasks. He reasons that it is important that some pedagogical tasks are defined by classroom activities as well and not only by activities that are associated with the “real world”. According to Harmer (2007) TBL is described as a good and useful method for language learning as it is meaning-based. However, it functions best in combination with other learning methods. Nunan (2006) states that TBL is a great method to use when one wants to maintain what the students already know, but it does not generate much learning of new linguistic elements.

Both CLT and TBL indicate that learners are expected to learn by doing as implicit teaching replaces function and meaning over form and explicit instructions.
5. Method and procedure

In this section the methods chosen to conduct this research will be illuminated.

5.1. Qualitative research

The aim of this research is to study how the learning potentials of the passion subject in connection with English are perceived by students and teacher.

Backman (2009) suggests that qualitative research should be concerned when dealing with personal opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals. The goal of the research should be to explore the participants’ views of the situation which is being studied, as they are the only ones who can reveal the meanings of their experiences and actions (p. 54). Bryman (2008) agrees on this and extends that the social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied (p. 385). A qualitative study provides more deep knowledge about what is being studied as it uses the words and perceptions of the participants. Therefore it is easier to produce convincing and rich cases for a wide audience (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 41). A negative aspect of qualitative studies is that the results can require further research. However, the flexibility of the method allows the further research to be conducted immediately (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 40).

Backman (2007) identifies interviews, various forms of participation and observation as some of the key elements in qualitative research (p. 59). Interviews and observation are chosen as the main methods for this research.
5.1.1. Interviews

Interviews are the most widely employed methods in qualitative research. As the main purpose of interviews in such research is that the researcher wants to gain rich data, the questions do not need to be connected to any schedule or guide. Therefore qualitative interviews tend to be flexible and responding towards the direction in which informants take the interview (Bryman, 2008, p. 437).

5.1.2. Semi-structured interviews

Various methods of interviewing are presented by both Bryman (2008) and Backman (2007). Semi-structured interviews are the main method for this research. Semi-structured interviews usually consist of a list of questions or topics to be covered. The informant has an open frame to reply within. A question does not necessarily need to follow on exactly in the way that it had been outlined (Bryman, 2005, p. 438). The reason for choosing a semi-structured interview is that it allows the interviewer to pose a question that has not been planned. A structured interview could have been used, but there is a risk that information can be lost by using this method. Dörnyei (2007) refers to structured interviews as “tightly controlled interviews” which force the informant to focus on the target questions. This leads to data which often is very precise and adjusted to the scheme that the interviewer has presented before (p. 135). I believe that a semi-structured interview is more likely to be experienced as a conversation. This might feel more comfortable for the informants. Especially in this case as the majority of them are young and probably not used to being interviewed.

Dörnyei (2007) suggests that semi structured interviews are suitable for cases when the researcher has a good enough overview of the scenery in question and has the ability to pose broad questions regarding it in advance (p. 136). In order to get this overview, observation was the second method used in this research.
5.1.3. Observation

Observation is a great method to use at the beginning of a research when an overall picture of the settings needs to be attained (Burton and Bartlett, 2005, p. 131). The intention of using observation in this research was not to produce any conclusions but to get an overview of the setting in order to simplify the focus of the interview questions. However the observation generated valuable data.

The observation was conducted as a participant observation, a popular method often used within qualitative research. It enables the researcher to observe the participants within the research field and to extract the meaning they attribute to their environment and behaviors (Bryman, 2005, p. 257). The participating observer is usually an interviewer and he or she participates very little in the actual setting, the classroom in this case (Bryman, 2005, p. 410). The method is helpful in many cases but one should keep in mind that in the case of classroom observation, the fact that an outsider is present might affect the participants (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 179).

The main aim of the observation was to simplify the focus of the interview questions. Two lessons were observed. During these two lessons I was first introduced as a researcher from the school of education and I was given the chance to explain the purpose of my research. I was also introduced as a person who has worked with rap music for some years. This was a good icebreaker, as the students felt comfortable with me from the beginning.
5.2. Procedure and selection of participants

Two different sets of questions were used as both students and teachers were interviewed. The informants were one teacher and three students. This was based on the amount of possible informants, the time frame given by the school to conduct the research and the time frame available for analyzing the material for the study.

At first the aim was to put focus on and interview the third year students as they probably have much more experience from the school and the methods which are used there. This could not be carried out though as the third year students were in the middle of a big project, which involved all other music passion subjects. The teacher advised me not to focus on them as they were too busy at this point. There would be a risk that I would interfere with their studies so this was out of the question. Unfortunately, the second year students were also in the middle of a big project and there would be a risk that my presence would affect them too.

This is the main reason why the first year students were chosen. A positive aspect of this is that the students were fresh and the new environment was new to them. The chance that they could provide detailed answers to the interview questions would be vast. A negative aspect is that they had spent too little time at the school and there could be a risk that they were blind towards the negative parts of it. As the rap classes are rather small (five students in the first grade), my preliminary intention was to interview all five students. One student did not feel comfortable with being interviewed, so I decided to only interview four students. On the day that the informants were supposed to be interviewed, one of the students was sick. Consequently three first grade students were interviewed.

The students were interviewed individually and the interviews were made in Swedish. The location for the interviews was one of the recording studios at the school where they spend lots of time and felt comfortable. Each interview took about 25-30 minutes. An application on my smart phone was used to record the interviews.

One teacher was interviewed as well. The teacher has worked at the school for eleven years. That is also when the rap program started. The teacher is a non-qualified
teacher who is a native English speaker. He is a famous Swedish rapper and has nearly 20 years of experience from the music industry.

More teachers could have been interviewed but the time frame did not allow this. Moreover, I felt that the results of the interview with this teacher, which is also the administrator of the rap program, where informative enough. Compulsory EFL teachers could have been interviewed also, as they would most likely present a different perspective of the students’ language acquisition. Due to time constraints, however, this was not possible. The passion subject teacher was interviewed in his office and the interview was in English. An application on my smart phone was used to record the interview.

5.3. Ethics

As a foundation for this research, I have followed the four main demands that are identified by the Swedish Scientific council; the demand for information, consent, confidentiality and the right of use.

Everybody involved in the research (students and teacher) including the principal of the school was informed about the purpose of the research. The focal point was to inform them about the main aims of the research without revealing too much information about details.

It was clarified that participation was voluntary and that they had the rights to refuse further participation at any time. The participants decided themselves to what extent they wanted to be involved in the research and to what extent they wanted to provide me with information. They are anonymous and have been given fictional names. The school setting and where it is located is anonymous as well. The participants were also informed that the collected data will only be used for this research and that they will not be shared with anyone else expect my supervisor and examiner (Vetenskapsrådet, 1990).
As a majority of the informants were under aged students, it was necessary to get their parents approval in order to interview them. I have followed what Dörnyei (2007) classify as the “passive consent form” (p.70). A consent letterform was sent to the parents of the students and they were asked to return it within two days if their parents did not allow them to be interviewed. All the students had their parents’ permission so none of them brought the letter back.
6. Results

In this section the collected data from the informants and the observation will be presented in three sections. First the data gathered from the observation will be presented. Secondly the data gathered from the interview with the students and finally the data gathered from the interview with the teacher.

6.1. Observation

Two rap lessons were observed. Five students were present during these two lessons. The first lesson lasted for 60 minutes and the second lesson 120 minutes. The classroom where the lessons were kept was not constructed as a stereotypical classroom, with chairs and benches. However, it had the size of a normal classroom (for approximately 25-30 persons). In the middle of the classroom, chairs were put in a ring. This is where the students’ and the teachers were during the theoretical parts of the lessons.

Throughout the first lesson a special rapping technique was discussed and examples of it were shown by the teacher. You Tube clips were the main materials used. Various clips where artists use this technique was showed and the teacher explained the pros and cons of the method, its origin, why it is used and how it can be mixed with other techniques. The teacher was responsible for most of the talking in this lesson. When he was teaching the students about the theoretical perspectives of the rap technique, he was speaking Standard English, which also is his mother tongue. When rapping or demonstrating the rap technique, he used various slang words from the British English
and American English. Several accents, slang expressions and ways of pronouncing words were juggled at the same time. Occasionally Swedish words were used.

The first hour of the second lesson started with the teacher providing some general information about an upcoming project and continued with finishing what was started in the previous lesson: the special rap technique. The second hour of the lesson was about writing rhymes. The students were given topics and they were supposed to write rhymes about it. During this part of the lesson the students were working individually. The teacher did not interact unless the students asked for his assistance.

Throughout both lessons the teacher-student communication was in English solely. If a student did not understand certain words that the teacher used or if the instructions were not clear enough, they mainly questioned it in Swedish. Only simple questions were posed in English: such as why, how come, for what reason and can you repeat that. The teacher responded in English at all times. Although some of the students responded in English occasionally, the student-teacher communication was mainly in Swedish. The student-student communication was by and large in Swedish as well, however, at some point, two of the students spoke English to each other. This was during the second lesson when they were writing rhymes. The two students who rap in English tried to help each other out when needed. It could be for example, when one student did not know the meaning of a certain word. The other student then tried to explain the meaning in English.

Most of the interaction was during the second lesson as the first lesson was mainly teacher-centered. In general the teacher managed to present the content of the lessons and the instructions. He seemed to be dedicated and enthusiastic about what he was teaching. It was evident that he was sharing the same passion as the students.

After observing two lessons I got a clearer picture of what was going on in the rap passion classes and what roles the teachers and the students’ played. This was a good foundation for the upcoming interviews.
6.2. **Student interviews**

6.2.1. Students’ perception of their passion subject and motivation

The students interviewed (appendix 1) are given fictional names: Alex, Bobby and Carl. They are all 16 years old and first year students at the rap program.

At first the students were asked why they had chosen the school in question and the rap program, as well as their experience of the school so far. All three students have been rapping for some years and they claimed that already in compulsory school they knew they wanted to become rappers. Alex and Bobby said that they had already in grade eight decided they wanted to attend the rap program. Carl made his decision in grade nine. Being tired of school at that point made him feel that the rap program would be the only thing that motivated his further education. “Already last semester, when I was still in compulsory school, we came here with my parents and I met the teachers. I was sold from that moment” (Carl, interview, 2011).

Two months after the start of the first year, all three students seem satisfied with the program and they look forward to go to school. Alex claims that he barely wants to leave school those days when the passion subject is the last subject for the day.

A topic that this research intends to cover deals with the students’ views on integrating their personal interests (rap) in their formal education. The positive and negative aspects of the passion subject were questioned. Alex stated that if he had to choose something negative it must be his mother’s view on his education. His mother could not take the rap program seriously, as she believed that rap would not generate a promising career for her son. Alex did not seem to be bothered by this since he viewed himself as goal oriented enough to become successful in what he is doing. Furthermore, he referred to the theoretical aspects of the rap program, where they study the music industry and economy in the music industry and argued that his mother would understand when the time was right. All students agreed that the positive aspect of the passion subject was that they felt motivated to go to school and they often even longed
for school. According to Carl, the fact that the teachers were professional rappers with celebrity status and several years of experience in the music industry was regarded as motivating and inspiring. No negative aspect was mentioned except for Carl’s utterance. Bobby did not mention any negative aspects either. He was satisfied with the education so far and claimed high expectations for the future.

Another topic which the interviews aimed to cover considered motivation. The students were asked how they were motivated, in what ways they felt motivated and what could motivate them more. The main source of motivation for all of them was the passion subject. They all agreed on the fact that the passion subject was the driving force, which made them come to school and put effort in the education, as they had chosen it themselves. The fact that all students are there for the same reason and that there is a unity among the rap students was an important aspect for Carl. Alex agreed on this and stressed the fact that they all listen to the same music, dress the same, and have the same role models, goals and attitudes. “We feel united this way and we have one aim” he said. The teachers played a significant role as well. Their presence alone was according to Carl inspirational enough as they have this “Specific energy and approach which make me want to accomplish more and more all the time” (Carl, interview, 2011).

Carl and Bobby argued that during the past two months they had learnt more about rap music and its history than they could imagine. Regarding future motivation Bobby looked forward to have “rap celebrities” and “famous people in the music business” as guest teachers. Alex also mentioned that guest teachers/lectures with people in the industry would be interesting. Carl did not comment this question.

6.2.2. Students’ perception of the integration of EFL in subject passion

As all the lessons in passion subject are in English, it was of relevance to find out the students’ approach towards this. All three students agreed that this was one of the important aspects of the rap program. Alex viewed it as getting extra lessons in EFL at the same time as doing what he has a burning desire for. Bobby said that he learnt new
words every time he had passion subject and that he usually notes them in his smartphone. “Sometimes I even try to use the new words as soon as possible in the creation of rhymes so that I won’t forget it” (Bobby, interview, 2011).

He also expressed that his regular practice of EFL in the passion subject had affected his compulsory EFL classes in a positive way, a notion that was indicated by his teacher as well. Bobby said that even if he would not wish to continue with his rap career after three years in upper-secondary school, he could probably study something that had to do with the English language. He was sure that after three years, he would be a fluent speaker. According to all three students, the main negative aspect of being taught solely in English was that they sometimes did not understand all the content of the lesson. Carl stated that in some occasions, difficult words could prevent him from understanding the big picture of what the teacher presented. At times the teacher could stop and explain the difficult words but often he did not. Bobby felt the same as Carl regarding difficult words and also expressed a wish that the teacher could speak a bit slower at times since he was not used to be taught in English at this level.

Carl and Bobby argued that the integration of the passion subject and EFL helped in their song writing and rhyming as they rap in English. Alex, who raps in Swedish, could not really agree on the fact that he could use the knowledge in his song writing as he writes in Swedish. Nevertheless he felt that developing one language could encourage another in one way or the other. As this student only raps in Swedish, a follow up question was posed regarding whether it was confusing for him to be taught to rap in English when his aim was to produce rap texts in Swedish. The answer was negative. He argued that he could rap already and that he learnt a lot about the rap and hip hop culture instead: “As the rap lessons are not solely about rapping, but also about the history of rap, the music industry and performance, it is not a problem for me” (Alex, interview, 2011).

The students were asked to compare the English they felt that they learnt in the passion subject in relation to the English they are taught during the compulsory EFL lessons. According to Carl, the main difference was that the EFL they learn in the passion subject is more fun than the compulsory EFL. Carl feels that the compulsory EFL lessons tend to be very textbook-based and boring. “I can not really relate to its content,” he said.
Alex felt that the EFL used in the passion subject was mainly for communication:

Our teacher is not a fluent speaker of Swedish so he has chosen to teach in English. This is the main reason for why we are taught in English I believe. Of course it is necessary to use English material since we are dealing with rap music, which has its roots in an English speaking country. But we could have been taught in Swedish as well. English material could have been used when needed. (Alex, interview, 2011)

He continued with describing the English he learns during the compulsory EFL classes as more conventional. Just as Carl, he regarded the compulsory EFL somewhat boring as well. He finished with saying that he did not mind being taught in English at all and that it was actually fun. The combination of the EFL used in the passion subject and the EFL used in the compulsory EFL teaching was a good mixture according to him as they complemented each other in his opinion. Bobby defined the compulsory EFL as more strict and the EFL used in passion subject as more relaxed. He believed that a mixture of the two EFL’s would probably help him learn English faster than other students: partially because it is two “different” variations of English and partially because he gets to practice it more often. He also stated that the EFL used in the passion subjects is probably more helpful for him when it comes to producing rap texts as he will learn a “different” English which varies from the compulsory EFL. Finally Bobby expressed that comparing to the beginning of the semester, he felt a development in his mastering of the EFL.

The main differences between the demands of the passion subject teacher and the demands of the compulsory EFL teacher were questioned:

The passion subject teacher wants us to produce rap and write lyrics while the compulsory EFL teacher wants us to learn English. It is not a must that we learn English in the passion subjects. However we do learn English there so I view it as extra knowledge being gained (Carl, interview, 2011).

Alex’s answer to the question was similar to Carl’s. He also mentioned that the demands of the passion subject teacher is more concerning the students ability of song writing, performance, stage attendance and other music related issues, while the compulsory EFL teacher solely focus on how and to what extent the students learn
English. Bobby did not think that the passion subject teacher cared at all about how much English they knew, as long as they produced proper English rap texts, if that was the aim. He referred to some of the passion subject students who only rap in Swedish and said that English for them was only a way of communicating with the teacher.

Finally potential difficulties in communication with the passion subject teacher were questioned. None of the students regarded this as a big issue, although they acknowledged that misunderstandings could occur occasionally. Carl said that he usually speaks Swedish to the teacher as the teacher understands Swedish, although the teacher almost always replies in English. “I understand more English than I speak so this is the best way for me to communicate with him” he said.

Alex used the same strategy and spoke Swedish to the teacher in nearly all situations. Bobby, who according to him self is a fluent speaker of English, expressed that he aim to speak as much English as possible but at times he switches to Swedish, even though the teacher speaks in English.
6.3. Teacher Interview

As only one teacher (appendix 2) has been interviewed, there is no need of a fictional name. He will be referred to as the teacher.

6.3.1. Teacher’s perception of the passion subject and motivation

The teacher was asked to reflect on the integration of students’ personal interests and the compulsory teaching. He viewed this as a great opportunity and argued that more schools should adapt this strategy and take advantage of its benefits. Nevertheless careful planning was stressed in order to avoid the results to be something like a youth center. As the interview continued, the teacher started to talk freely about motivation:

I cannot speak for any other institution but here we try to use students love and passion for whatever that is and use that as the main source of motivation. We are in a time where students hardly want to be in school. Therefore our main goal is to keep them in school, active and motivated. Secondly we try to develop them individually and prepare them for a profession (Teacher, interview, 2011).

The teacher referred to the local curriculum where it is stated that students should be encouraged to be entrepreneurs. He regarded that as something positive and argued that the moment student are creative it makes them great entrepreneurs.

It is great to be able to come to school and make that become a reality and what’s significant about rap in relation to the other passion subjects is that students need to begin writing immediately, from day one. You have to be productive and creative. And in order to be productive and creative you need to feel motivated (Teacher, interview, 2011).
In order to make the students feel motivated the teacher has them to experience what he refers to as “short term victories” as often as possible. This means that students are put in situations where they can succeed. Often by engaging in different projects (everything from one lesson to several weeks long). Every occasion is constructed in order to generate “short time victories”. “After a while, the students believe that they are unbeatable and that nothing can stop them. That is the key! Our psychology builds upon constructing a confidence” (Teacher, interview, 2011).

Furthermore guest lecturers, working with musicians and educational field trips are other motivational strategies that are used. According to the teacher, many students who have graduated from the rap program have moved to Los Angeles to do further studies at MI (Music Institute), which is a leading music institute in the world.

When they come back from holidays they sometimes contact me and say that what they learnt here has helped them a lot in their further education. So this gives our education world-class status (Teacher, interview, 2011).

The teacher continued stating that many of the same students also express that they are glad they were taught in English as it has simplified their further studies a lot. Automatically this led to the next set of questions which considered teaching the passion subject in English.

6.3.2. Teacher’s perception of the integration of EFL in passion subject

Several reasons were mentioned as for why the teacher teaches in English; being a native speaker was one of the main arguments. He also clarified that his command of Swedish is not strong enough so that he can teach fluently. He meant that he could probably teach in Swedish if he exerted himself, but the result would not be as if he would teach in English. Additionally much of the material that is used in teaching rap is in English and derives from the United States. The teacher stressed the fact that it is essential to teach that specific culture with material that derive from the very same cultural. However he did not deny that they use material from other parts of the world as
well. A follow up question was posed as the teacher mentioned the reasons for why English is the language he teaches in: Your mother tongue alongside most of the material used for teaching is in English and this has resulted in an indirect integration of EFL in the rap program?

The answer was both yes and no. Yes, because he is a native speaker and the material is in English and no, because of what is stated in the curriculum. He referred to the national curriculum where it is specified that “students has to develop a global language and work across borders” and “Students should be able to handle large texts in English”. According to the teacher, it is also stated in the local curriculum that as long as the students receive the meaning of the passion subject, it does not matter whether it is in Swedish or English. However, he stress the fact that the local curriculum also raises the importance of using English as a teaching medium in some cases as the history and culture of rap music derives from an English speaking country.

What is important is that the students understand the meaning of what I am teaching. As long as everyone is comfortable with it then it is approved and after 11 years no one has ever complained. I’m here to teach rap, not EFL, that’s a bonus (Teacher, interview, 2011).

The teacher also suggested some negative effects of teaching the passion subject students in English. He expressed that some students might have limited comprehension of English and that therefore there is a risk that sometimes they might not understand the content of certain matters. This can cause some misunderstanding from time to time but it is usually not a big issue according to him. At times he tries to speak slowly and more clearly if he notices that the students have difficulties in following the teaching. However sometimes there is a lack of time and this is not possible. Furthermore he states that if the students feel difficulties in communicating with him in English, they easily switch to Swedish.

Finally it was stated that some students only speak Swedish to him and he tries to reply in Swedish at times, but his communication with the students is mainly in English.
6.3.3. The connection between passion subject and compulsory EFL

This part of the interview focused whether the teachers at the rap program had any contact with the EFL teachers of the students and if there was any form of subject-integration with the compulsory subjects. According to the teacher there was some integration between various passion subjects, such as dance, music and basketball. Very little integration occurred between the compulsory EFL lessons and the rap lessons. There had been some projects where subject integration had been carried out, but not enough. The teacher exemplified one integration project which was carried out during several semesters, but stopped a few years ago. This was a project together with the compulsory EFL classes among others. The students were supposed to interpret some of Shakespeare’s works and change them into rap lyrics. The rap students’ role was to write the manuscript in rhymes, using a mixture of old and modern English. The reason why integrations like this did not occur anymore was not really clarified by the teacher. Although he did mention that some of the compulsory EFL teachers from that time had quit and new teachers had been employed. Nevertheless, the teacher assumed that occasionally they have heard from the compulsory EFL teachers that the rap students are usually better speakers of English than other students.

As there is a lack of integration between the rap program and the compulsory EFL lessons the teacher was invited to comment on what could be done to improve the contact between the teachers at the rap program and the teachers of the compulsory EFL. It was expressed that the main issue was lack of communication, from both parts. The only thing that could change the current situation was more communication. The teacher also stressed this as being important, as there is a possibility of increasing the learning possibilities of the students with little effort.
7. Discussion

The aim of this research was to find out how the learning potentials of the passion subject in connection with English were perceived by students and their teacher at the rap program. The research questions were about students’ and teachers attitudes towards the involvement of their passion subject in the formal education process, as well as their views on integrating EFL in the teaching/learning process of their passion subject. The approach towards involvement of personal interests in the compulsory teaching was very positive. In general, the attitude toward being taught and teaching in English was perceived as positive with some negative side effects. The results of the research will be discussed below.

7.1. Students and teachers perception of motivation

The students that were interviewed seemed to be satisfied with their education so far and they had a positive approach towards the forthcoming years of it. They all agreed on the fact that the integration of their personal interests as the passion subject, in the compulsory education, was the primary reason for them feeling motivated to go to school. The role of the teacher was significant as well. He is a person that students look up to and admire as he masters an art form that they are being trained to master. This is one of the factors according to the students that make them feel motivated. Dörnyei (2001) argues that nearly everything a teacher does in the classroom has a motivational influence on the students. He exemplifies the teacher’s enthusiasm, commitment to- and expectations from the students as well as the teacher’s relationship, as some key elements in order to get students motivated (p. 32). The result of the interviews and
observation shows that the teacher is an enthusiastic person who has a passion and dedication for what he is doing. This is evident for the students as well and they admire it. The ability to reveal this enthusiasm public rather than hiding it is one of the most important aspects of motivationally successful teaching (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 33). It was also obvious that the teacher and the students had a good relationship. This was mainly notable when the teacher was offering assistance to the students. At some points he even skipped his breaks in order to answer their questions and provide them with the information requested.

In the interview with the teacher, he says that “short term victories” are one of the methods he uses in order to keep the students motivated. Humans do things best if we believe we can succeed according to Dörnyei (2001). He argues that when we expect success, we learn the best way (p. 57). This might be regarded as a basic and simple method. Nonetheless the teacher argues for it as an effective and doable method. It is difficult for a researcher to measure the results of these “short term victories.” Partly, because I as a researcher did not experience any such moments and partly because the students had only attended the school for some months. This means that the perception of the students might not be enough to conclude whether they have experienced any such moments or not.

The fact that the students only has been going to this school for a few months can also be problematic in the sense that a full picture of their educational process has not yet been created. As everything is new to them and they are doing what they love to do (rapping), they might be blind for the negative aspects of their education since the positive aspects of it dominate. This is also evident in the interview results as they mainly express positive feelings regarding their education. Most likely the answers would have been different if they would have been interviewed in the second or third year, as they would probably have developed a wider awareness of their education. This would probably allow them to view it more critically. The interview results also show that some students have been tired of school and in need of extra motivation. Both students and the teacher confirm this.
7.2. Language acquisition

Alex and Carl mention that the students are a group who share the same interests and has the same goals. This is a crucial reason for their positive approach towards their education. It is important both in the case of motivation and language acquisition. Since the students have a common interest and goal, their learning environment is comfortable for them. When this environment feels comfortable, the affective filter will automatically be lowered. If the environment will not be comfortable for the students, there is a chance that a mental block prevents them from acquiring received input. When the affective filter is up, the acquirer might understand what message is delivered, but it is not certain that the input will reach him or her. Meaning that if the students’ current level is “I” the comprehensible input which is “I + 1” will be lost unless the filter is lowered (Krashen, 1985, p. 13). This can occur when the acquirer feels unmotivated or lacks in self-confidence. Naturally, the filter is down when the acquirer is not concerned with the possibility of failure in acquisition and when he or she considers himself or herself as a potential member of a group (Krashen, 1985, p 45).

Krashen’s affective filter hypothesis along with the input hypothesis implies that classroom input must be interesting (Krashen and Terrell, 1983, p.56). Applying Krashen's theories on the results of this research shows that there is a possibility that the students at the rap program acquire EFL unavoidably as they have a lowered affective filter and are exposed to comprehensible input. Judging from what the students’ says, there seems to be opportunities for learning to occur during the compulsory EFL classes, mainly based upon what Carl refers to as textbook-based learning. This can be interpreted as a dichotomy in language learning and acquisition.

A reason why language acquisition occurs is the fact that the teacher speaks and teaches exclusively in English about subject matters that the students are interested in. Therefore acquisition of EFL is more or less unavoidable. This is positive and it strengthens the students’ utterances about getting “extra lessons” in English. All though English, which actually functions as a medium to provide knowledge about rap music, seems to be appreciated by the students, there are consequences to this.
In the English curriculum for upper secondary school it is confirmed that students should develop a global language and have the ability to use English in various situations and separate purposes (Skolverket, 2000). In the music curriculum for upper secondary school it is identified that students should be provided with the opportunity to develop skills for communicating with the musical audience they are aiming for (Skolverket, 2000). Hence, in the local curriculum at the school where the research was conducted, it is stated that as long as the students receive the input of the passion subject, it does not matter what medium is used. These are some of the arguments the teacher uses as an underlying cause for why he teaches in English. He also adds that since his command of Swedish is not fully developed and the fact that he is a native speaker of English, it has naturally resulted in him teaching in English. Much of the material he uses for teaching is in English so this plays an important role too. A result of this is that large amount of code switching occurs. The teacher-student interaction is one way: the teacher communicates in English with the students and the students’ reply in Swedish. At times the teacher uses certain Swedish words in order to simplify his point and at times the students use English words and phrases in their interaction with the teacher.

The fact that code switching occurs does not necessarily need to have a negative impact according to Grosjean (2010). He discusses that code switching does not have to do with insufficiency or lacking knowledge in a certain language. According to him it can be handy to have the ability of code switching in order to deliver a message.

This means that in the case of the interaction between the students and the teacher at the school, there is a risk that if too much code switching occurs, the students might develop an EFL which is not fully appropriate. Besides, the students state that at times they do not understand the meaning of certain words or phrases, something that can result in messages being incorrectly understood. Unfortunately the teacher does not always have the time and ability to simplify his meaning.

In addition, the teacher juggles Received Pronunciation with various forms of slangs from the British- and African-American culture. As discussed before, the students will most likely acquire the same English which the teacher presents to them and this might be beneficial for the students as they probably adapt new words and phrases that will be useful when they produce rap texts. This does not necessarily need to be regarded as a
negative notion. However the teacher should demarcate when the Standard English should be used and when various slangs should be used.

7.3. Communicative language teaching and task based learning

Viewing this from a CLT perspective, learning a language is a process that is mainly achieved by using the target language for a communicative purpose (Littlewood, 1984, p. 53). What becomes indistinct here is which one the target language is, as Swedish is mixed with English and various forms of English slangs that are used within the rap culture. There is a risk that the students will use the same mixtures that the teacher uses in order to communicate. Again, this might be beneficial for their passion subject but the effects of it on their EFL acquisition might be negative.

The fact that the students at the rap program are taught in English is a great concept which could be developed. Ellis (1999) identifies that one of the main aims of communicative language teaching is to provide opportunities for students to participate in interaction where the goal is to exchange meaning rather than learning the language in question (p. 193). A central aspect of language learning is about the importance of working on the communicative functions of a language. If this theory could have been adapted in the passion subject classes, there is a possibility that what the students refer to in the interviews as “getting extra EFL lessons at the same time as doing what we love” could be implemented even more. Although some students have the feeling that they are improving in EFL, there is very little communication in English. The observation shows that student-student interaction in EFL only occurred at one point.

A significant issue in this case is that the teacher at the rap program is not a qualified teacher at first, but a rapper. Even though he is a great pedagogue, has vast knowledge in rap music and the music industry, and has a passion for his profession, he might not be the ultimate EFL teacher. The teacher himself also confirms this as he says that his
job is to teach the students about rapping and the music industry. If the students increase their knowledge in EFL it is a bonus according to him.

If there would have been better communication between the compulsory EFL teacher and the passion subject teacher, maybe these matters could have been conceived and implemented. Results of such integration would most likely be a bonus for the students at the rap program. Improved communication between the teachers could be beneficial for the results of the mixture of Standard English and the slangs which some of the students might acquire as well. An ideal scenario would be if a compulsory EFL teacher noticed that a rap program student tend to mix slang with Standard English, it could be noted, brought up and discussed with the teacher at the rap program. The rap program teacher could then possibly implement various strategies to work on this and aim for distinguishing between when to use slang and Standard English.

One method that could be implemented in this case is TBL. As Nunan (2006) suggests, communicative approaches solely are not enough for language learning. Therefore pedagogical activities, which are defined by classroom tasks, are important to implement as well. It is also central that the outcome of these classroom activities is non-linguistic. These pedagogical tasks could consist of tasks that activate abilities such as comprehension, production and interaction in the target language. As Harmer (2007) suggests, learning could occur in such a situation as the students are focused on completing the task.

Nevertheless it is essential that the teacher indicate the primary meaning on the task and the completion of the task as essential in order to be assessed (Nunan, 2006, p.111). By doing so, the students have a clear goal to aim for.

There are other positive aspects of eventually better communication between the passion subject teacher and the compulsory EFL teacher. As the teacher interview shows, there has been some integration between the passion subject and the English classes: the Shakespeare theater. This integration was apparently ongoing for a while but stopped some years ago. This is a great loss as such integrations could probably be profitable for promoting the students learning possibilities in both the compulsory EFL classes and the passion subject. Integrations as such could result in the students having the ability to develop their EFL because they are practicing it with communicative activities in a real context (Dodson, 2000, p. 6). This argument is strengthened by one of
the students as well. Bobby mentions that he feels more confident now in speaking English than he did in the beginning of the semester and that his teacher has confirmed it as well. He also states that the English he learns in the compulsory EFL lessons is stricter than the one he gets to practice and suggests a mixture of them. Nevertheless he realizes that the English he might acquire during the passion subject is mainly a medium to communicate message and aimed for the production of rap texts.

Finally, the notion of language awareness is important in the case of this research. Although Krashen’s theories can be implemented on the passion subject students’ abilities and possibilities to acquire EFL, language awareness should be considered. Hawkins (1984) describes that the possibilities of learning a language are increased if the learner has Meta-knowledge. By Meta knowledge he refers to the notion of what the language consists of: namely structure, grammar, vocabulary and pragmatism. The learner must thus be aware of the language rules in order to be able to use it. Language learning and language acquisition goes hand in hand and one cannot exclude the other. Therefore language awareness should be considered in order to fully take advantage of the language which the learner wants to learn. We can talk about CLT and TBL as theories in the case of this research, but that is not what the focus is on at the passion subject, in the rap program. The focus is on vocational education for students who are interested in producing rap music. However there are good possibilities that should be taken advantage of. One of these is the EFL which is used as a tool for communication during the rap lessons. This is something that should be considered as it makes more learning and acquisition can take place.
8. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate students’ and teachers’ perception of the learning potentials of the passion subject in connection with English. Two research questions were posed: The first question was regarding the positive and negative aspects of involving students’ personal interest in the formal education process and the second question was regarding the students’ and teacher’s views on the integration of EFL in the teaching and learning process of the passion subject. Observation and interviews were used as methods in order to answer these questions.

The result shows that the teacher and the students view the involvement of students’ personal interests in the formal education as a key source for motivation. Regarding the involvement of EFL in the passion subject, the results are both positive and negative. The students are positive in the sense that they view it as getting extra EFL lessons. The negative aspect is that information can be overlooked as the students do not always understand the input. According to the teacher this is a negative aspect as well. Nevertheless the teacher confirms that his role is not to teach the students English but rapping. EFL is used as a medium to communicate and teach about rap.

If students in the second or third year would have been the focus group of this research and if more data would have been gathered, the results would most probably have been different. There is a great possibility that the students would have been more critical towards their education. Mainly because they have more experience than the first year students. As previous research shows, there are various strategies used for promoting motivation and language acquisition. This research is however seated within a rather new frame where not much previous research has been conducted. Hopefully the results of this research can facilitate further investigations within this field.

Finally, I would argue that the rap program is a great vocational education that has the potential to develop and grow. A first step towards this would be more integration
and communication at the local level: namely between the different teachers and school staff. The study shows that there are great possibilities for language acquisition in the rap program. More advantage should be taken of these possibilities by implementing strategies that allows the students to grow within this field. Language awareness can be one of them.
List of References

Primary sources:

Classroom observation carried out 2011-11-19 – 2011-11-21

Interviews with the three students 2011-11-26

Interview with teacher 2011-11-28

Secondary sources:


Appendix 1

What are the reasons for why you chose this school?

Why did you choose the rap program?

What are the positive and negative aspects of integrating your personal interests in the compulsory teaching?

How do you feel motivated?

What can motivate you more?

How are you motivated at this school?

What are the positive and negative aspects of being taught in English?

What do you think are the differences between the EFL you might learn in passion subject compared to the compulsory EFL lessons.

How do you communicate with the teacher?

Do you face any difficulties when communicating with the teacher?
Appendix 2

What are your thoughts regarding the integration of the students personal interests in the compulsory teaching?

What is motivation according to you?

In what ways do you motivate your students?

What is the reason for your choice of teaching in English?

Is there an indirect integration of EFL in the rap program?

What do you consider are the positive versus negative aspects of teaching the students in English?

Do you have any contact with the compulsory EFL teachers of your students?

Why not?

Is there any integration between the rap program and other subjects?

Why not?

What could change the current situation and contribute to more integration between the rap program and the compulsory EFL classes?