Why students at vocational programs are absent from English classes

Orsaker till varför elever på yrkesförberedande program skolkar från engelsklectioner

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1. Introduction

I have been teaching English at two upper secondary schools in a city in southern Sweden for the past three years and the most frequent discussion among the teachers that I work with concerns how to tackle the high level of absence and truancy. This topic consumes more than half of the conferences and discussions among the teachers outside the classroom as well and we are always discussing what to do about the students that are absent and how to motivate them. The main reason for teachers´ concern is that if a student is absent it is difficult for the student to meet the objectives. The second reason is that it is difficult for teachers to have any continuity and it has an effect on their work when students are absent too much.

This is a subject that also engages the government, The Swedish National board of Student Aid and the Swedish National Agency for Education. As a result certain measures have been taken in the last couple of years. For example if a student’s absence reaches over 20 percent, his or her, Student aid will be cut. Unfortunately, students find loopholes such as calling in sick or attend certain classes. They also make sure that they stay above the 20 percent limit. The latest effort that has been made is to introduce a computer system, Dexter or Skola 24, designed to allow parents to check the attendance of their children by logging in with a password. The third approach has been to call parents. However, that measure besides being very time consuming, seems to have no effect at all. It is also worth mentioning that it is not legal for teachers to call parents when a student is above the age of 18. According to Swedish law these students are adults.
Since I teach English and since I and several English teachers have had numerous discussions about truancy among students, I am very interested in why some students are absent from classes and their reasons for not attending English? Is it because they are ill or are they playing truant? And if the reason is truancy, what would make them attend the English classes?

1.1 Purpose

My study is set to investigate why certain students do not attend English classes and to what extent they play truant and in that case what are the reasons behind it? My focus is on students that are attending vocational programs. My main reason for concentrating on these students is because it seems that they are at a higher risk of failing English in comparison to students that need English to attend university. The common perception among the English teachers at the school where I teach is that many students prefer to concentrate on the studies that have to do with their future profession than to attend English classes. After several years of working at this school and many conversations with other English teachers I am also aware of the problem. However, it is also important to mention that truancy is a problem that does not only exist at vocational programs. It is an important issue at any upper secondary program.

Absence and truancy are problematic for all teachers and in particular language teachers since it is difficult to assess students that do not attend classes. As a teacher of English I found it very interesting to investigate why students are absent. To reach that aim I state the following research questions:

- Why are some students at vocational programs absent from English classes?
What would make or motivate these students to attend the English classes more often?

2. BACKGROUND

Very few studies have been made in Sweden about truancy and absence and the reasons behind truancy linked to English as a second language in upper secondary schools. However one major study about truancy was conducted by Martin Karlberg and Knut Sundell in 2004, Skolk, *sund protest eller riskbeteende*, but this study was linked to absence and drugs and not English. This study focused on students in Stockholm during a period of one year. In their summary the researchers concluded that during a ten week period 59 percent of females and 57 percent of males have been absent from upper secondary school for at least one day. The students often came from a family of a single parent and the majority came from Swedish blue color background. Furthermore, the researchers concluded that the students that played truant did not feel comfortable in school, had less stamina, were more often angry than their peers and lacked grades in one of the core subjects English, Swedish or Mathematics. The students’ parents were also less involved in the students’ lives and the students were often friends with other students in the same situation. Karlberg and Sundell mentioned eight reasons why students were absent:

- They wanted to avoid difficult situations
- They wanted to signal that they need help
- They had problems with parents or other social factors
- They had psychological crises
- They felt disillusioned by the school, teachers and friends in school
They struggled with their education

They felt bad

They were influenced by friends who demanded that they play truant

(Karlberg & Sundell, 2004, translation)

These explanations could be divided into four groups connected to family related reasons, school related reasons, friend’s related reasons and personal reasons. The family related factors are that the parents were not involved in the students’ life or education and the parents often have problems that were drugs or alcohol related. Other factors were bad relations to the parents, large families, single parent households, low income, low social group, divorces and death. School related factors concerned that the students lack encouragement, did like the classes, did like teachers or their peers and also that the students felt there were no consequences of truancy. The reasons related to friends were that students often play truant in groups and students are often influenced by their friends that played truant. Finally the personal reasons showed a strong connection between language difficulty and truancy. The research ended with a discussion about the responsibility the schools have to prevent truancy.

HvitfeldtT, Andersson B & Hibell, 2002, Skolelevers drogvanor 2001(rapport67)Centralföbundet för alcohol – and narkotikaupplysning did a twenty year long study about truancy from the late 70s to 2001 and concluded that students absence has increased from 15 percent from 1992 to 21 percent in 2001. The numbers were 55 percent among boys and 46 percent among girls. The reasons behind truancy were mainly related to drugs and substance abuse.
The third study was conducted by the Crime prevention Council in 2003 and covered the period from 1995 to 2001 (Brottförebygganderådet, 2003, Stöld, våld och droger I årskurs nio. Resultatet från fyra självdeklarationsundersökningar.). The students were not from upper secondary school but ninth grade. The study showed that truancy decreased from 40 to 36 percent among boys and from 47 to 42 percent among girls.

The fourth research study was made by the Swedish National Agency for Education in 2003 and the study’s aim was to investigate the quality of education in Sweden (Skolverket 2003). The study was conducted from 2001 until 2002 among compulsory schools and upper secondary schools in 40 Swedish cities. The Swedish National Agency for Education concluded that truancy among students in the third year of upper secondary school was 44 percent during a period of four weeks and the students played truant at least five times during that time. According to the study, 31 percent of these students stayed home to read homework or prepare for a test.

The fifth and final study was made by Ida Lundblad, *Issues of Students Absence* in 2006. Her study investigated how teachers’ workload is affected by students’ absence and the strategies that teachers use to handle the absence with the aim to keep their workload down and to obtain equivalence and fairness.

Lundblad described the rules and policies for absence at both local and official level in her dissertation. She mentioned that even if upper secondary schools are non-compulsory, the school attendance is compulsory once a student is accepted. On the other hand, truancy and absence can not be a factor when teachers assess a student. Students can only be assessed according to how well they meet the objectives. Nevertheless attendance
must be reported to the Swedish National board of Student Aid, an authority responsible for the financial aid for students (www.csn.se 2008-04-30). Students must meet certain criteria, namely 80 percent attendance per month to be entitled study grants. Otherwise their financial aid will be cut.

*Lpf 94*, the curriculum for the non-compulsory school system, does not state any regulation for attendance since upper secondary school is not compulsory. However, *Lpf 94* does state that students are responsible for their studies and for their learning. Whether responsibility includes attendance, is up to the student to decide (The Swedish National Agency for Education *LPF 94 The curriculum for the Non-compulsory school system* www.Skolverket.se 2008-04-30). For example English A is a core subject and therefore compulsory in upper secondary school but attendance is not. This means that as long the student meets the objectives, attendance is irrelevant. Never the less the course syllabus for English states that attendance is important and necessary. (The Swedish National Agency for education, Course syllabus for English www.skolverket.se 2008-04.30).

The local work plans for the schools that I teach at do not state any guidelines to reduce absence though this is the issue that consumes most of time at the class conferences. Class conferences, are attended by all the teachers involved and the head teacher, each and every student is discussed and especially students with high degrees of absence. Different approaches are then suggested to change the situation, for example how to increase the student’s motivation and responsibility. If the student is under the age of 18 the parents are informed about the student’s situation. If the student is above 18 the parents may not be contacted, but since information about absence is official, parents may receive the information on their own initiative. If the absence continues, the student
will get an oral warning from the form teacher. The next step is a written warning and if the attendance does not meet the criteria for full time studies, the student is reported to the Swedish National Board of Student Aid, which means that the student’s aid might be cut.

The latest approach to increase attendance among students is a computer system designed for parents to check the attendance of their children. Dexter or Skola 24 web based programs were introduced a year ago in August of 2007 and makes it possible for anyone with a code to log in and be able to see the student’s attendance. How often the system is used by the public or if the attendance among students has decreased since the system was introduced, is difficult to say since there is no evaluation has been carried out of the system so far.
2 Methods

This study aims to investigate why some students at vocational programs at upper secondary school do not attend English classes and what the students think might increase their attendance. This research is based on the students own narratives and is viewed through their perspective. The method I use is in a qualititative tradition, which aims to capture the participants’ perspectives and get them to talk about their own experiences and understandings (Hatch Amos, 2002, Doing Qualitative research in education settings pp 102).

3.1 Location of the Research

The location for my investigation was at two upper secondary schools in Helsingborg, a city in the south of Sweden. Helsingborg Municipal has 124 900 inhabitants which makes it one of the largest cities in Sweden (http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Helsingborg 2008-04-30).

The two upper secondary schools in question have an average of 1200 students each and 12 different programs, both theoretical and vocational. Many students live outside the city or in different districts that belong to the region which means that they have to travel by train or bus every day.

3.2 Selecting Participants

My research was conducted at two upper secondary schools which are also the two schools where I have been teaching for the past three years. The reasons why I chose the two schools for my investigation is that I am familiar with the school, the teachers and
students and also felt that I have good contact with the students. Therefore it was easy to find participants.

The focus group consists of students in first, second and third grade at upper secondary schools who attend vocational programs. I chose students at vocational programs because they share similar characteristics and in some case the same experiences (Hatch pp24). The students are both female and male, but predominantly males, and the age varies between 16 to 19 years of age. There were 60 students answering the questionnaire and five students who participated in the interview. All students attend vocational programs at Industry program (IP), Vehicle program (FP) and Children and Leisure program (BF). The criteria for selecting students were that all of the informants have to have English as a second language and that they had a high degree of absence or had difficulties meeting the objectives. Unfortunately students who answered the questionnaire were also students that attended English often and did not play truant. Since I wanted to get a broader picture I included part of the questionnaire in my research as well. I thought that it could be interesting to find out why students do attend and what motivates them not to play truant.

Since I conducted the study without my supervisor’s approval I had to dismiss most of the questionnaire as a lot of the questions were not relevant to my research. Only six questions and answers were relevant to my research (Questionnaire pp 41-44) and therefore I include them as well. 60 students answered the questionnaire, however only five of them answered that they do not attend the English classes often. 55 students answered that they never or rarely missed English classes. Since my study focus on students that do not attend English classes, this study is less relevant as majority of the
informants who answered the questionnaire do attend English. However I wanted include some of the answers in my result since it is interesting to know why some students do attend English classes and the reasons why they do not play truant.

3.3 Collecting Data

Qualitative and quantitative research aims at exploring the participants’ point of view and I have used both questionnaires and interviews as data collection tools. The interviews that I conducted were semi-structured and in-depth interviews. They were semi structured since I came to the interview with predetermined questions; however the questions are still “open to following leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during interview interaction” (Hatch pp94). Furthermore they are also in-depth since my aim is to “go deeply into the understandings of informants” (Hatch pp94). The questions were open-ended and I tried to avoid why-questions since I wanted the informants to describe their point of view and not lead them into specific answers or put them on the spot (Hatch pp110). No questions are of course completely natural since only by asking a question the informant is already aware that the researcher finds the issue important and it is also difficult to avoid why-questions completely (Hatch pp 105). The questions that I stated in the interview were formulated according to my teaching experiences and conversations with other teachers during conferences and discussions outside the classroom. My aim with the interviews is to find out the reasons behind the students´ absence.

I used questionnaires as my second data collection tool since quantitative data is superior to the qualitative method when gathering information concerning quantity but inferior when measuring issues of subjectivity (Johansson & Svedner, 2006, Examensarbete i
On the contrary to the interview my research questions were rather close-ended with plenty of yes and no questions and forced choices although I avoided why-questions (Hatch pp 23). Unfortunately I conducted the study that involved the questionnaires without conferring with my supervisor first which meant that I had to disregard part of the questionnaire. However a lot of the answers were relevant to my research. Therefore I still included them in my final result.

3.4 Procedures

Prior to handing out the questionnaires I informed the students about the study and the purpose behind it. I also guaranteed them the anonymity of their names and also informed them that the study was voluntary. The study was conducted at the end of an English class and it took students 15 to 20 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. None of the students declined and everybody participated. Unfortunately the focus of my research are students that do not attend or miss English classes on a regular basis and since the questionnaire mainly included students that always attend classes, I had to disregard part of the questionnaires. Students who participated were predominantly male but some were female. The age ranged from 16 to 19 years of age and everybody attends vocational programs. All in all there were six classes and 60 students that answered the questionnaire. I started by asking background questions of the informants connected to age, gender, and ethnic background and since what age they are studying English. I also asked questions that concerned their parents for example if the parents spoke English, their attitude towards English and if they were engaged in the informants` studies. Furthermore I wanted to know how students live, how long time it takes them to get to school and also if their study conditions at home are suitable. I continued with essential
questions to get to the purpose of my study (Hatch pp 105). The questions I asked concerned reasons why the students think they do not attend English classes or why they do. The questions were multiple choice questions. I also asked what kind of measures it would take for informants to attend English classes and if they did attend what measure would make them hypothetically attend. Finally I thanked the students for their participation and once again ensured them of their anonymity.

For the interview I asked five students to participate. Prior to the interview we agreed that the time for the interview would be conducted during their regular English class. Although I chose the students randomly all of them are familiar with me since I have been teaching at their school for some time. Since their teacher is a colleague and friend of mine. That is why it is possible to conduct the study during their English class with their teachers approval. All five students are male, attending second or third year at a vocational program and have difficulties passing English and have a high degree of absence. Since I did not want the students to influence each other I conducted the interviews individually in a small group room that was available. I started by presenting the purpose of my research and ensured them that their confidentiality was guaranteed. Furthermore I assured the informant that there is no right and wrong answer only their honest perspective on the issue (Hatch pp 105). After some small talk we looked through the questions together and when I felt that the participant felt at ease I let him answer the questions. Though the interview was semi- structured the questions were open-ended which allowed the informant to share his perspectives in his own words (Hatch pp108). The interview started with background questions that inquired about the informant’s age, background, mother tongue, at what age he started to study English and also how his prior schooling looked like. Furthermore I wanted to know the student’s attitude towards
English and his social situations meaning interaction inside the classroom between his classmates and the teacher.

The questions asked were essential questions to my study and the aim was to get at the purpose of the study which is how to increase the attendance among the students. The questions I asked concerned if he felt that the school gave him enough scaffolding and whether the student felt he could do anything to change his results? Finally I asked what the student felt was the major reason why he did not attend English classes and what he thought would motivate him to come more often?

At the end of the interview I asked the informant if he would like to add anything and I thanked him for his time and participation (Hatch pp 106).

### 3.5 Results of the questionnaires

First and foremost I would like to discuss the answers of the students that answered that they do not attend the classes though there were only five of them. The answer they gave to the question why they do not attend English is: two answered they were too tired and three that they felt they were academically behind. Answer to the question what rule or measure would make them to attend the lessons: two answered if they would be suspended, two if social services would get involved and one student answered something else but at least no punishment.

The 55 students that answered the reasons why they rarely or never missed English answered: 29 that they felt English was important to them to succeed in life, five because English is fun, eight because they do not want to play truant, six because it easy
for them to learn languages, nine because the teacher is competent and one did not know. The answer to the hypothetical question if they would not attend classes what kind of measures would make them to attend more often: 22 answered no grade in English, 17 answered suspension from the school, eight involvement of social workers and six if the school would call their parents.

Answer to question if their parents thought English language was important to acquire: 55 informants answered yes and five that they did not know. Also the informants that do not attend English answered yes to the question.

Answer to the question if parents help or helped the students with English in the past: 26 answered yes and 29 answered no. The five students that do miss classes, all of them answered no.

Answer to the question if their parents checked their attendance on Dexter or school 24: 53 answered no and only seven yes. The five students that do not attend English often answered no.

Answer to the question if CSN or student aid was important to them: 57 answered yes and three no. Out of the five students that missed English often four answered yes, student aid is important to them and one answered no.

A majority of the students, 53 percent, attend English classes because English is important to their future, 16 percent because the teacher is competent and 14 percent because they do not want to play truant. At the same time the students who do not attend
English, do not attend because they are tired and academically behind. Of the students who are attending English, 40 percent felt that not getting a grade in English was the measure that would make them attend the classes if they were to play truant. 30 percent of the students felt suspension was the measure and 14 percent stated that involving the social services would stop them from playing truant. The students who often play truant felt that suspension and involvement of the social services would make them attend the classes.

### 3.6 Summary of the questionnaire

According to the students a majority of the students parents, 92 percent think that English is important to know and I can only assume that since the parents have a positive attitude towards English that the students has it as well. On the other hand only 43 percent of the students received help from their parents with their homework. This can mean that the students are too old for parents to get involved in their education or that the parents do have insufficient knowledge of English. Still 57 percent of the students’ parents seem not to be involved in their education and these students still do not play truant.

In general parental involvement seems to be limited since 88 percent of the students answered that their parents do not check their attendance on Dexter or Skola 24. Therefore one can only assume that parental involvement might not be the major reason why students do not play truant. On the other hand, 95 percent felt that student aid was very important to them.
According to the student’s responses to the questionnaire the students that attend English do that because their grades and school are important to them. They also feel that the teacher is competent. Students that do not attend feel that they failed in school or that they are unmotivated. It seems that even if a lot of students received help with their studies the parents involvement is not the most important issue for students’ attendance. Since student aid is also important to the majority of the informant’s one can only assume that personal reasons rather that pressure from parents motivate students more to attend school.

### 3.7 Analysis Process

Since I did not have any Dictaphone I had to take short notes during the interviews. After each interview I wrote a summary as fast as possible. Even if the method is not the most preferable it can be done if the researcher is conducting the interviews individually and have time to reflect on and summarize the interview as soon as possible after the interview is conducted. Since I had time between the interviews I had the time to reflect and summarize the interview.

### 3.8 Trustworthiness

The weak part of my research was the questionnaire since the majority of students who answered the questions were the ones who attend English classes regularly. It is likely that the students that had the highest absence and did not answer the questionnaires. Therefore I can see a problem conducting quantitative research in the future if all the participants are not present.
The interview’s trustworthiness can be questioned as well since I have to rely on the informants’ answers, their point of view and their perspectives. However, since qualitative research relies on informants’ voices and their interpretations it is not up to me as a researcher to judge but only to present and convey the results.

I also realize that the issue of absence might not be something students normally reflect on and they might need more time to think and reflect over the issue. Furthermore one on one interview might be very embarrassing to them.
4 Results

I have interviewed five students in upper secondary school about their views on why they felt that they have difficulties passing English and why they think they are or were absent from English classes. I also asked them what they felt could be done to change the situation and motivate them to attend more often. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and I have translated all quotes into English. I also chose to introduce the informants as Adam, Peter, Eric, Patrick and Roger and present their stories individually.

4.1 Portrait of Eric

Eric is 18 years old, tall, blond and is in his second year of a vocational program. The first year at upper secondary school he attended a PRIV course in English since he did not pass English in ninth grade. When he started second grade he was approved and therefore he is now taking course A in English. At this point he received an IG warning from his teacher at it is most likely that he will not pass course A. He began to study English in third grade. When I asked him to tell me about his background he said “I’m Swedish and I always lived with my mother. My father left when I was eight moths old and we don’t really have any contact with him. But my mother has always been very involved in my school though her English is not very fluent. I don’t have any sisters or brothers only cousins and me and my mother live in a nice apartment. I think we get a long great but she is disappointed that I have problems in school.”

According to Eric, the problems with his studies began in fifth grade when he started at a new school. This is the way the informant explained the situation. “We as students at this school we were allowed to work independently and structure lesson plans on our own. As
a consequence I had a lot of freedom to do what I wanted to and I took advantage of the situation since nobody supervised me. Although I played truant and spent time with my friends instead of studying nobody seemed to notice. In fact at every PTA meeting the teachers told my mother that I was meeting the objectives just fine. This made me think that everything was okay. I didn’t realize that I was doing anything wrong because I was too young to understand.”

By eight grade Eric changed schools again and suddenly he noticed that he was many years behind his classmates. The problem got even more serious since he did not get along with his English teacher. He felt that the teacher was constantly putting him down instead of encouraging him. “I hated her and she made me feel stupid and worthless. She was always on my case and everything I did was wrong “. He did not pass English in eight grade and started to play truant again. The situation continued in the same way through the final year and he failed English in ninth grade.

The situation changed when Eric began at upper secondary school and joined a PRIV course in English. The informant then received the help and encouragement that he needed and passed the course after one year and began study course A. However the present situation suggests that he will not pass the course. According to the student the problem is that the class has too many students and he is not getting the help he needs.” I feel that I lack basic grammar and vocabulary. My teacher is very good but with so many students in my class he doesn’t have the time to give me the help I need. Sometimes I believe it would be better for me to go back to a PRIV class so I can get the help I need.” He added that he also feels that the teacher puts to much pressure on him.
When I asked if the student felt English was important and about his current situation in the class room, he answered that he thinks English is very important since he wants to work abroad in the future. He also says that he is getting along with his class mates even though he is aware that he is academically behind the rest of the group. Since he feels that he is getting more support he is not playing truant anymore and attends every English class. Student aid and the grades are also as equally important to why he is not playing truant.

Eric thinks that it is his own responsibility to study more and describes him self as a somewhat lazy. However he also thinks that it is very important that a teacher understands a student, try to encourage him instead of putting him down. The student concluded that this situation would never have occurred if he had attended a conventional school from the beginning and if he would receive grades maybe in fifth or sixth grade. ” Maybe if I would get a real grade back than I would realize that I was behind and study harder. By the time I switched schools I was to behind and didn’t understand anything.” The major reason according to Eric why he is not passing English A is because he had too much freedom for many years and right now he feels that it is almost impossible to keep up and meet the objectives.

4.2 Portrait of Peter

Peter is 18 years old, dark haired, stocky and attends the third year of a vocational program. He was born in Sweden but his parents are from Poland. Both his parents think English is very important though only one parent speaks English. “I began to study English in third grade but English was always a difficult language for me to learn although I passed English in ninth grade as well as course A.” Therefore he signed up for
course B even if the course is not compulsory for vocational programs. At the present situation he has an IG warning which means that he might not pass course B.

The major problem occurred when Peter began to study course B. According to him the teacher he had the first two years at upper secondary school was very incompetent and could less English than him. They never spoke English during the classes, he never had to do homework and therefore he had no difficulties passing course A. The shock came when he started course B and got a new teacher that is very advanced. “I than realized that I was very behind the objectives. I lack basics in grammar and my reading and writing is not very good either. The teacher we have now puts a lot of pressure on me and he takes for granted that I can certain things which I don’t.”

The informant claims that English was always difficult for him to learn, although his spoken English is relatively good. However his writing and reading skills are limited. When I asked what he thought the reason was to why he spoke good English but could not read and write, he answered “I don’t know why. When I speak English it comes very easy to me but to read and write English is much harder. I also hate to study vocabulary lists. The English I know is from TV or computer. It is not from reading books. “

Since the student thinks that English is very important for his future, therefore he will take a summer course in English. ” I also consider going away for one year to the US to improve my English. I think it would be a good opportunity for me to be in an English speaking environment. This way I can learn English much easier.” When I asked him about the classroom situation, he said that it “is a little bit messy”. He likes his class mates but thinks they are too loud. Therefore he has a hard time concentrating.
Peter admits that he does not study enough and thinks that if he studied harder his grades would improve. He says that he plays truant a lot but he makes sure that he stays under the 20 percent attendance that he needs to keep his student aid. When I asked him why he does not attend classes he answered “I really don’t know. Sometimes I’m too tired and sometimes I think that the lessons are boring and unstructured. It can get quite noisy here as well. Everybody is talking and it is hard to think.”

Finally I asked him to summarize why he feels that he runs the risk of not passing English? He said primarily it is him self that does not study enough but another reason is also that since his teacher in the past was incompetent, he did not learn what he suppose to learn. “I think it is impossible for me to change my grade before the summer because I’m so behind the objectives. This also a reason why I feel it is not important for me to attend the English classes. Like I said before my reading and writing skills are just not good enough. And even if I would study harder now, I don’t feel I would be able to keep up. It is better for me to go to US for a year and learn there.”

4.3 Portrait of Adam

Adam is blond, tall, charismatic and attends the third year of a vocational program and has a Swedish background. He began learning English in third grade and has never had any problems in school. His parents are not divorced and only one parent speaks sufficient English. The person who helped him with homework and English is his cousin and he passed ninth grade with a G. Since he always had good grades he signed up for course B. He has an IG warning at does not think that he will pass English.
Since he is in the same class as student B he describes similar reason why he thinks he will not pass English. “The first two years at upper secondary school were very easy and I got VG in course A. Since the teacher could not speak sufficient English I felt that I could get away with anything. We never got homework and her English was really bad. Furthermore, the teacher was absent a lot which meant that we had a lot of substitute teachers and no continuity. The lessons were much unstructured and really boring. We only read in the text book and never spoke English.”

When the informant began course B he realized that the gap between the two courses was too vast and he had a hard time to keep up. This is what he had to say about the present situation.” The present teacher we have puts a lot of pressure on me and he thinks that I can more that I actually do. I also think that what we need is more repetition since it is not only me that lack basics in grammar and vocabulary. At this point I can’t keep up because the level is too high.”

According to Adam he is rarely absent but admits that he plays truant and does not study enough at home. “I know if I would study harder I would probably be able to pass. School always came very easy to me but I just don’t feel motivated enough.” he says. He likes his class mates but describes them as loud and he feels that it is hard to concentrate during the lessons. Since he thinks English is important for his future he will attend the summer course in English to improve his English. When I asked him to give me a major reason to why he is failing English he said “Really bad teacher for two years and partly that I have been a little bit lazy and tired of school”. He thinks it really does matter if a teacher has the skills to teach for students to succeed or attend classes. Equally important
it is to have the same teacher and continuity. Finally he adds that student aid and grades are very important to him but he attends classes often because it is good for his future to know English.” In the end even if the money is okay but it is not a lot. I don’t want to loose my student aid but my main reason to attend classes is to speak English fluently. I believe that English is very important for my future because I want to work abroad. Today everybody communicate in English and you feel stupid if you can’t speak English.”

4.4 Portrait of Patrick

Patrick is dark, tall, 19 years old and attends the third year of a vocational program. He has an Albanian background and came to Sweden in second grade. He began to study English in fifth grade and says that he never had any problems with language or learning languages. His parents do not speak English very well but his siblings always helped him with his homework and English. He passed English in ninth grade and in course A and therefore continued with course B even if the course is not compulsory. Presently he has an IG warning and does not think that he will pass the course.

Patrick describes his problem similar to Eric and Peter. According to the informant the first two years were very easy and unstructured, and that the teacher never gave them any homework. He describes that most of the time the students worked with the textbooks and hardly ever spoke English.” It was always the same” he says.” We opened our textbooks, than we read couple of pages on our own and than we did the exercises. I don’t believe I ever heard the teacher speak English besides “Hi” and “Goodbye”. Sometimes we listened to tapes and maybe once in a while we watched a TV program in English. Then we got test and that was it.” Like his class mates Patrick also thinks that
the gap was too big between course A and course B and he feels that he lacks basics in the language. In addition the present teacher works not with textbooks but rather with themes and expects the students to be more active and participate during the lessons.” I feel that the teacher puts a lot of pressure on us and expects us to speak in English, write stories and a lot of other things we never did before. I don’t know if he realizes how far behind we are. A lot of times I don’t want to listen to him because I don’t know what he is talking about.” According to the informant the problem is also that the class and the students are loud and it is hard to concentrate during the lessons.

Patrick thinks English is important for his future but he is not planning to attend any summer school. He thinks that maybe in the future he will make an attempt to improve his grades but at present moment he is too tired and unmotivated. When I asked him what he thinks might be a major reason to why he is failing English he answered “me, myself “. Even though the last teacher was not competent he says that it is his fault since he does not want to study. When I asked him if the school could do anything to help him he answered “At this moment I don’t think anything could help. I know that I’m smart and could do a lot more if I really want to e.g. study at home but I don’t want to. You could call me lazy but I’m just not motivated. If I really wanted to pass English I would study more and probably pass because I never had any problems in school. But right now I just want to do something else”.

The informant admits that he is playing truant a lot and has been absent to the point that his student aid has been cut but since he is working part time he says that he does not care. When I asked if the teachers or the school could do anything to make him attend more he answered that he does not know. Finally I asked Patrick to conclude the reasons
behind him failing English and being absent from English classes he answered “The fault is only mine the way I looked at it. Even if a teacher is bad it is still my responsibility to go to school and study at home. Of course it helps if the teacher is competent but in the end I need to study as well. If I don’t feel motivated nobody can force me to do something I don’t want to. Like I said maybe in the future I will take another class in English but right now I rather work than study. ”.

4.5 Portrait of Roger

Roger is 18 years old, blond, serious and attends the second year of a vocational program. He has a Swedish background and began to study English in third grade. He barely passed English in ninth grade and presently has an IG warning. It is not likely that he will pass course A.

Roger started to tell me that his problems began when his mother passed away when he was 10 years old. “My mother died of cancer and everything changed. Before me, her and my father and my sister we lived in a house outside Helsingborg. Only two years after my mother died my father met a woman and we moved in with her in to Helsingborg. Even before we moved I played truant and had a hard time to get a long with my teachers. But after we moved it got even worse. I didn’t get a long with my family and I didn’t want to go to school. My father tried to do his best but it didn’t help “Roger continued and describes himself as intelligent and driven and he claims that the only reason why he passed English in ninth grade was because he performed extremely well on the National test.” The funny thing was that the teacher back than didn’t want to pass me but since I got VG on the test she had to pass me anyway.”
The informant says that he always got help from home and his father was always very
involved in his school work and his studies. Roger thinks that English is important but
not necessary for his future and since he has no plans to go to university he really does
not think English grade is very important. He also adds that the most important skill is
that he can communicate in English. “After all” he said. “If I feel that I can speak English
and make myself understood, is the only thing that matters. I don’t need to have good
grades to prove myself and I don’t think it is really important. Right now I just want to
finish upper secondary and do something else. If I fail I fail. I don’t really care.”

The student’s present situation is satisfactory and he attends all the classes but only since
he has been warned by the school too many times and the consequence would be that he
will not be allowed to attend next year if he is absent. He also admits that he is lacking
basics in English and he is very academically behind compared to his class mates.

When I asked him what he felt could improve the situation, he answered “More variation
during the lessons “. He explained that as far he can remember all the English classes
have been the same with vocabulary lists and boring grammar. If teachers could make it
more fun to learn and vary the lessons it would not be as monotone and boring to attend
classes. Another problem according to him is too many substitute teachers. “Sometimes
we have different teachers every month. Not only in English but also in other subjects as
well. And every time somebody new comes in they don’t know our names and what to
do. I also think we talk too much in groups. I don’t like that because it makes me feel
uneasy. But of course it is a personal problem that I have”. He also feels that if his self-
esteem was better he would probably perform better in school.
Finally when I asked him for measures that could help him to attend English and to improve in English he answered “The school already took measures and since they warned me I have no choice but not to attend since I need my student aid and probably can not get a job. I really do not do too much during the classes but it really does not matter. I might also get lucky if I pass the National test. To improve my English I have to study which I am not motivated enough to do.”

4.6 Summary

Although all five informants think that the English language is very important to master for their future and for themselves, they still admit to playing truant regularly or that they had played truant in the past. All five informants have also problems meeting the objectives for English and failing the courses. According to informants the most common reasons behind playing truancy are incompetent teachers, boring teaching methods, not enough support from teachers, noisy lessons and that student themselves are not motivated. What would motivate students and not play truant are competent, supportive teachers, more structured lessons, better teaching methods and if they met the objectives. At the same time everybody admitted that they did not study enough and the school is not solely responsible for their studies but they have responsibility for their learning as well. The contradiction is that they can not meet the objectives unless they study and attend classes.
5 Discussion and conclusion

In this final chapter I will discuss the result of my study, answer the questions that been posed in my research and finally present the conclusion.

5.1 Discussion of the results

The aim of my study was to investigate why some students at vocational programs do not attend English classes and the reasons behind their absence. I was also interested in finding out what would motivate students to attend more often and if any measures could help to increase their attendance. I chose this issue since this a subject that consumes most of the conferences and discussions among teachers at the school. As Lundblad stated in her dissertation *Issues of students’ absence*, even if attendance is not compulsory at upper secondary school, the school attendance is compulsory once a student is accepted. Even if truancy and absence cannot be a factor when teachers asses a student, only how well the students meet the objectives, attendance is still important. It is hard for a teacher to asses a student and it affects the teachers’ workload if a student is not present and does not attend classes. Furthermore Lpf 94, the curriculum for non-compulsory school system, does not state any regulation for attendance, but it states that the students are responsible for their learning. As well as the syllabus for English states that attendance is necessary and important.

I do not know how high the absence and truancy are in numbers at the upper secondary schools where I conducted my research are, but it is a big problem since so many of the conferences and discussion among the teachers are about this issue. I can only again relate to the study that The Swedish National Agency for Education conducted between
years 2001-2003 which showed that during a four-week period 44 percent of the students at the upper secondary school were absent at least five times (Skolverket). Furthermore the study that was conducted by Centralförbundet for alcohol and narkotikaupplysning showed that students absence by increased from 15 to 21 percent from 1992 to 2001. As well as the study made by Crime prevention Council that covered the period 1995 to 2001 showed that truancy among boys was 36 percent and 42 among girls. I would only imagine that the numbers must be similar at the schools where I conducted my research. Therefore it is important to find out the reasons behind the truancy and maybe decrease the numbers.

I understood from my research that sometimes there are a lot of different reason why students play truant and in some cases the pattern already begins in the middle school and continues over many years. Especially the major reason why students “give up” and do not attend classes is when they can not keep up with their studies and feel that they are too academically behind. At a certain point they are so much behind that they feel it is unnecessary to attend English classes. Many of the students also pointed out the importance of skilled, supportive, competent teachers and teachers who can encourage students instead of putting them down and making them feel even less able. Even the students who do attend classes thought one of the major reasons why they attend is because they feel that the teacher is “good”, in the sense of competent and supportive.

According to the informants majority felt that English is very important to their future which shows that it does not matter if the students attend vocational programs or not. Truancy has rather to do with their motivation, support from teachers and if they struggle
with their studies. It seems that students attend classes primarily because it is important for them to know English rather than for any future university studies.

Surprisingly, most of the students felt that they were partly responsible for not passing the courses and pointed out that it was also their responsibility to attend classes and study and not only the teachers. This shows that students are aware that they are expected to take more responsibility for their own learning. Instead of only blaming the school they realize that they are also a part of the problem. This was very mature and insightful.

Furthermore, even if majority of the students felt that the measure or rule that would make them attend English classes would be suspension, the involvement from social workers or not be graded, I realize during my research that it can not be the solution to the problem. Though in some cases when the school warned with suspension the student attended but since he is still not motivated it does not matter that he attends classes since he does not receive any new input.

I also believe that even if it is important that parents are involved in the students’ education it is still not the major reason why the students attend English. Of course it helps but according to the informants the new computer system Dexter is not used or rarely used. The students that also said that they parents do not check on them whether they attend classes. It rather seems that the old system linked to student aid has a bigger impact, since as the students put it “we need the money “. However I do not think that the system is very good since students find loopholes such as calling in sick and they making sure that they stay under the 20 percent absence that is necessary for them to receive the student aid.
Finally I want to once again to refer to Karlsberg’s and Sundell’s study in which they concluded that the reasons behind truancy can be that the students struggle with their studies, lack of the encouragement from teachers that the students did not get along with the teachers and death in the family. My research only reinforces their thesis though I did not found any connection between drugs and absence since I did not investigate this relation in my study. My study only focused on absence and truancy linked to English education.

5.2 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate what reasons students at upper secondary school at vocational programs have for playing truant or why they do not attend English classes. The studies also aimed at investigate what would make students more motivated and what would make them attend English classes more often. Finally I was also interested in finding out if the students at the vocational programs thought that English was important for their future and also their attitude towards English. After the informants shared their experiences and views the result showed that encouragement and competent teachers are the major reasons why students are attending English classes. If the students fall behind and can not meet the objectives they feel that it is unnecessary to attend English classes. If a competent and insightful teacher can notice that students have problems and support them or her at an early stage I think the absence would probably decrease. The problem today is that classes are often too big, even the students agree. It is also difficult for
teachers to help students individually since there is not enough time to do so. After conducting my study I do not think that stricter rules would be the solutions to the problem. They would only solve the problem temporarily by forcing students to attend classes. If a student attends an English class but is not motivated to learn the language, the problem is not solved since teachers want students to learn and be active during classes. To conclude my final research I was happy to learn that students at vocational programs thought that English was important to them and their future. There is a risk that the teachers have preconceived ideas about students attending vocational programs. English is important to many or most of the students attending these programs.
References


Dexter, (2008) a web based program for registration of absence


Course Syllabus for English The Swedish National Agency for Education

www.skolverket.se 2008.04.30


The Swedish National Board of Aid, www.csn.se 2008.04.30

Intervju underlag
Elevernas inställning till frånvaro från engelsklektioner

Den här intervjun är baserad på frågor som jag ställer till elever på gymnasiet som går yrkesförberedande program och som har en hög från frånvaro eller som ligger på gränsen till att få IG i engelska. Alla intervjuer är cirka 40 minuter långa och eleverna är anonyma. Mitt syfte med denna intervju är att ta reda på vilka orsaker ligger bakom att dessa elever inte kommer till engelsklektioner. Mitt syfte är också att ge en mer detaljerad bild av dessa personer. Eleverna är tillfrågade en och en eftersom jag inte vill att de ska påverka varandra med sina svar.


**Attityd** Vilken inställning har du till engelska? Hur viktigt är det för dig att kunna engelska? Varför är det ( inte ) viktigt?

**Klassrummet som social miljö** I vilken utsträckning trivs du i engelskrummet med andra? I vilken utsträckning känner du att dina engelskkunskaper räcker till?

**Skolans stöd** I vilken utsträckning känner du att skolan har gett dig stöd när det gäller dina studier i engelska? Kan du ge ett exempel hur du hade kunnat bli hjälpt?

**Egna insatser** Hur bedömer du dina kunskaper i engelska? Hur ser du på dina egna insatser att klara engelskan? Vad hade du kunnat göra för att klara dig ännu bättre?

**Frånvarons betydelse** Vilken är den största anledningen till att du ofta inte kommer till engelsklektionerna? Vad anser du att lärarna eller skolan hade kunnat göra för att påverka
din närvaro? Vilket är ditt eget ansvar? Vad skulle kunna få dig att vara närvarande oftare?
Din syn på engelskundervisning

Den här undersökningen är anonym dvs. ni ska inte skriva era namn. Däremot ska jag intervjua 5 elever för längre, personliga intervjuer (ca 30 min). Om du skulle vilja vara med på en sådan intervju skriv ditt namn här ...........................................................................................................................

1. Är du man eller kvinna
2. Hur gammal är du ? 16  17  18  19  20
3. Hur länge har du lärt engelska? Sen årskurs  1  2  3  4  5  5  7  8  9
4. Hur ofta missar du engelska?

Väldigt ofta                      Mindre ofta / Nästan aldrig

Obs!!!!! Om du har svarat väldigt ofta så kan fortsätta svara på denna sida. Om du har svarat mindre ofta eller sällan hoppa över denna sida och gå vidare till sidan 3.

1. Ditt modersmål är   svenska   annat (ej inluderad)
2. Jag missar engelska för att jag är
   A sjuk
   B trött
   C missat för mycket. Hänger inte med
   D Behöver inte engelska för mitt framtida jobb eller studier
   F Ligger fel på schemat
   G gillar inte engelska
   H Annat..................................................................................................................................
3. Pratar dina föräldrar bra engelska  
   Ja  Nej (ej inkluderad)

4. Brukar dina föräldrar hjälpa dig med engelska  
   Ja  Nej

5. Tycker din familj engelska är viktig att kunna?  
   Ja  Nej

6. Kollar dina föräldrar din närvaro på Dexter eller skola 24?  
   Ja  Nej

7. Du bor i  
   villa  
   lägenhet (ej inkluderad)

8. Mindre ort  
   större ort (ej inkluderad)

9. Har du lugn och ro att plugga hemma?  
   Ja  Nej (ej inkluderad)

10. Bryr du dig om ditt CSN bidrag?  
    Ja  Nej

11. Vilken regel hade fått dig att komma till engelsklektionerna?

   A streck i betyget

   B ringa föräldrarna

   C blanda in sociala myndigheterna

   D avstängning från skolan

   E ingen möjlighet att läsa upp betyget på komvux

   F Annat..........................................................
Du har svarat mindre ofta eller sällan och fortsätter med frågor på denna sidan

1. Ditt modersmål är svenska annat ( ej inkluderad )
2. Pratar dina föräldrar bra engelska? Ja Nej ( ej inkluderad)
3. Brukar dina föräldrar hjälpa dig med engelska eller har hjälpt dig? Ja Nej ( ej inkluderad)
4. Tycker dina föräldrar att det är viktigt med engelska? Ja nej
5. Kollar dina föräldrar din närvaro på Dexter eller skola 24? Ja nej
6. Du bor i villa lägenhet ( ej inkluderad)
7. Mindre ort större ort ( ej inkluderad)
8. Har du lugn och ro när du läser hemma? Ja nej ( ej inkluderad )
10. Du missar engelska sälla eller aldrig för att
    A Det är roligt
    B Har lätt för språk
    C Bra lärare
    D Måste kunna för att ta mig fram i livet
    E Ligger bra på schemat
    F Vill inte skolka
    G Annat.................................................................................................................................

11. Om du hade skolkat vilken Regel hade fått dig att komma till lektionerna?
    A streck i betyget
    B Ringa föräldrarna
    C Blanda in sociala myndigheter
    D Avstängning från skolan
    E Avstängning från engelskan
F Ingen möjlighet att läsa upp betyget på komvux

G Annat..............................................................................

Tack för eran samverkan. Vill också påpeka en gång till att denna enkäten är anonym