Examensarbete i fördjupningsämnet

Engelska och lärande
15 högskolepoäng, avancerad nivå

Olika skolors val av engelskundervisningens start i F-3
Different schools’ choices of when to start English instruction in K-3

Sandra Trivat

Grundlärarexamen med inriktning mot arbete i förskoleklass och grundskolans årskurs 1-3, 240 högskolepoäng

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2015-03-23
Foreword

I would like to say a big thank you to everyone who has supported me in writing this paper. Thank you to my supervisor, Damon Tutunjian, for putting up with foolish questions and late e-mails and drafts. Thank you to my husband, friends and family for putting up with a stressed writer for many weeks. Finally, a thank you to all head teachers and teachers that took time to answer my questions so that this paper could be written.

Sandra Trivat

Förord

Jag skulle vilja säga ett stort tack till alla som har stöttat mig genom den här arbetsprocessen. Ett stort tack till min handledare, Damon Tutunjian, för att du orkat stå ut med onödiga frågor och sena mail och utkast. Ett stort tack till min man, mina vänner och min familj som har stått ut med en stressad student i många veckor. Och slutligen ett stort tack till de rektorer och lärare som tog sig tiden att svara på mina frågor så att den här uppsatsen kunde bli av.

Sandra Trivat
Abstract

In Sweden, there are three subjects that are mandatory to pass to be qualified for further studies (gymnasium) after year 9 of elementary school: English, Mathematics and Swedish. Sweden has a long tradition of teaching English as a foreign language in schools, from a very young age. However, municipalities and schools are given the freedom in Sweden to decide when to start teaching English, between age 7-10, which means that there could be a great difference between schools and different parts of the country. It also means that there are different reasons and discussions behind when and why students should start learning. The purpose of this paper is to investigate what reasons and discussions lie behind different schools’ decision of when to start teaching English. The head teachers and one teacher from three different types of schools were interviewed to find what their views were. The results look at whether the decision was based on research, if teachers were involved in the decision, whether they viewed positive or negative effects of an early language start, if there are any practical issues with an early start and whether or not different age starts affects an equal school for all. The four interviewees answered quite similarly to the questions with only some exceptions. The decision at all schools was to start English language instruction from year 1, in a playful manner with games, songs and rhymes. The general feeling at all schools seems to be that the earlier language instruction starts, the better. This assumption has not been based on any specific research, but rather something, that is considered a ‘universal truth’.

EFL, early language start, Sweden
# Table of contents

Introduction

Purpose and research question

Background

Gains in student motivation

Second language improving first language

Early language start fosters nativelikeness

Methodology

Participants

Materials

Procedure

Results and Discussion

Decision based on research

Teachers’ influence in the decision

Positive or negative effects of an early start

Effects on first and second language acquisition

Practical issues and competent teachers

An equal school for all?

Conclusion

References

Appendix 1

Interview questions in English

Interviewfrågor på svenska / Interview questions in Swedish
Introduction

According to Baker (2011), being able to use more than one language and to be able to make oneself understood to others in different languages may enhance one’s self-esteem and self-confidence as a “learner, linguist and language broker” (pg. 121). Learning many languages is viewed as important for both individuals and society as a whole in large parts of the world – and in Sweden no less. However, how and when languages should best be introduced is well debated and there are many aspects to take into account. Baker (2011) goes on in his text to discuss the effects of an early or late language start when it comes to second language acquisition. The discussion shows that older learners acquire new languages faster in a formal classroom environment, than younger learners will. However, the length of exposure to the language is an important factor when looking at language proficiency. Since young learners will be exposed to another language for a longer time, an early language start may result in higher proficiency.

In Europe, English is the language that is primarily taught as a foreign language in almost all countries (European Commission 2012). A European Union legislation concerning language learning and linguistic diversity states that it is a goal that all member states work towards education that includes learning a mother tongue and at least two other languages from a very early age and which also promotes linguistic diversity (European Commission 2003).

In a report by the European Commission (2012), some key findings on the nature of English as a foreign language in the different member states have been summarized. The report states that the duration of teaching of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) has increased throughout EU by lowering the age when teaching starts. The language start usually ranges between six and nine years old and in almost all countries, education authorities set this age. However, in Sweden, Finland and Estonia, the age at which English starts is determined by the schools, but within a year range set by education authorities. In Sweden, students may start learning English between 7 and 10 years old. The report states that “according to statistical data in Sweden, 57.3 % of 9 years old students learn at least one foreign language.” (p. 25) This means that only about half of all students start learning a foreign language before the age of 9.
These findings show that across Europe and in Sweden, second language acquisition is promoted to start at an early age. On the one hand, this is supported by literature and research that debate a critical period hypothesis, where children at a certain age are at a developmental stage in their brains where they can acquire new languages easier. This ability disappears, as children grow older. It is also debated that children can ‘soak up’ new language and can acquire language in an informal and playful setting. On the other hand, the benefits of an early start to second language acquisition is well debated and does not have any clear answers. According to a study by Enever (2007) a recent review of relevant research on the subject across Europe made by the EU, found that much of the available research was insufficient and inconclusive.

According to the Bulajeva and Hogan-Brun (2010) study “between 1984 and 2003, Italy, Austria, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Spain lowered the age at which pupils were introduced to EFLL [Early Foreign Language Learning]” (p. 83). This means that Sweden has a long tradition of teaching English as a foreign language in schools, from a very young age. Skolverket states that through the implementation of the curriculum in 95/96, heads of schools were given a larger freedom to organize teaching in different ways. This change resulted in that 31% of new students starting primary school in 1995 also started learning English from year 1 (Skolverket 1996).

In Sweden, there are three subjects that are mandatory to pass to be qualified for further studies (gymnasium) after year 9 of elementary school: English, Mathematics and Swedish. Students who do not go on to gymnasium are very few and studies by Norberg (2003) on commission by the Swedish government show that they do not go on either to further studies or to work. Therefore, it is of very great importance for the schools to make sure that students pass these three subjects. While Swedish and Mathematics are the focus from year one and take up the main part of the hours in a school day, English has been given a much lesser scope in the Swedish school today.

These findings show a conflict in the Swedish system. On the one hand, Sweden has a long tradition of teaching foreign language and English in particular, with some schools following EU directives by starting to teach as early as possible. English is also given special status by being one of three mandatory subjects. On the other hand, it is up to the schools to decide when English teaching should start. The steering documents (Skolverket 2011) promote an
equal school for all, but if students all start at a different age, have they all been offered an equal education by the time they finish elementary school?

During my practice as a teacher, as well as during my teacher education and practical studies, I have come across very different opinions regarding English and when it should start. Some teachers I have met feel very strongly about English and that it should start as early as possible, promoting a playful introduction to language with songs, games and rhymes. However, I have also heard concerns voiced about children with other mother tongues than Swedish and children with reading and writing difficulties. These teachers are concerned that children need to learn to read and write properly in one language before being pressured into reading and writing in a completely new language. There is also a concern with teachers that they do not feel secure teaching English since many of them do not feel they have enough education to teach. Lundahl (2007) brings up the issue of this in her study, where she states that since 1987, it has not been compulsory to include English in the teachers’ education. As of 2011, this has changed, including English in the teachers’ education again; however, the active teachers practicing in schools today will mostly be of the old education. If teachers are given the opportunity to influence the decision of when to start English, these different opinions would show different thought processes behind the decision. However, if it is only up to officials (head teachers or officials of municipalities) to decide, the decision could be based on other grounds. These different views from practicing teachers and the freedom which lies on municipalities or schools in Sweden to decide when to start teaching English means that there are different reasons and discussions behind these decisions. It also means that there could possibly be a great difference between schools and different parts of the country. This paper proposes to investigate these reasons and discussions to shed some light on how some schools decide.
Purpose and research question

The goal from the European Union is to start with foreign language instruction as early as possible to promote linguistic diversity. Most European countries start teaching English as a foreign language at an early age, Sweden included. However, Swedish schools differ in that students may start within a range of three years. It is up to municipalities and schools to decide when to start.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what reasons and discussions lie behind different schools’ decision of when to start teaching English. The paper addresses the following question:

What reasons lie behind different schools’ decision of when to start teaching English?
Background

There are a number of studies that have researched the effects of an early start in foreign language instruction, as well as the gains of foreign language instruction. This following chapter is a synthesis of some of these studies.

The collected studies show three of many different gains with an early language start in an EFL-setting (English as a foreign language). In the first section, studies showing gains in student motivation will be viewed (Lundahl 2007; Cepik and Sarandi 2012; Abu Rass and Holzman 2010). The second section looks at studies that indicate that learning a second language doesn’t interfere with the first language (Fallon and Rublik 2011; Knell et al 2007; Mangubhai, 2001; Elley et al 1996). Finally, the last section will focus on the effect of an early start on nativelikeness (Foster et al 2013).

Gains in student motivation

Lundahl (2007) performed an action research study in Swedish schools where 123 teachers were allowed to develop their EFL-teaching into action research projects and reflect upon them and the effects they had on their students. The process took place over a period of 20 weeks, with theory and practice divided equally over the period. The different projects where divided into 5 themes: early language start, motivation, target language use, language methodology and tactics as well as documentation and progression. Lundahl derived that three factors are crucial for a change and development of the English subject in Swedish schools: an early start, linguistic awareness and use of target language. While the results did not show any benefit on language acquisition through an early start, students’ motivation and interest in learning, as well as their self-confidence was improved by an early start.

Another study based in Turkey (Cepik and Sarandi 2012) on the benefits of an early start in EFL also showed that there was no difference between early and late starters of EFL in the proficiency tests performed. The study wanted to see if there was any difference between early language starters and late starters. Eighty-three 11-year olds were tested in proficiency tests in four language skills. The students were divided into two groups: early starters (5-6
years) and late starters (9-10 years). Six teachers were also allowed to participate through a questionnaire on their own beliefs in an early language start. As stated, the results showed that there was no difference in the proficiency test between the different groups. However, the teacher interviews showed that early starters are more motivated and eager to learn, something that cannot be shown through a proficiency test.

This increase in students’ motivation is also shown through Abu Rass and Holzman’s (2010) study of book flood program. The study is different from the other in that it studied the effect of language immersion and a book flood program, not the effect of an early language start. The research involved fifth and sixth graders in an Arab elementary school in Israel. The students’ attitudes towards being taught through stories and books were investigated through questionnaires that the students answered. In addition, the teacher students teaching the class partook in reflections observations and interviews, and all these findings were then analyzed. The results found that in studies of book flood programs where students learning English as a foreign language were immersed in reading of authentic texts as well as in the target language, the results not only improved in English. Even if this study does not look to the effect of an early language start, the effects of the immersion program was that students’ motivation and eagerness to learn and participate was noted by the teachers of the program to increase.

Second language improving first language

Apart from gains in motivation in book flood and language immersion programs, one study shows that learning a second language may improve students’ first language, not inhibit it. The study performed by Elley, Cutting, Mangubhai and Hugo (1996) investigated the results of different book flood programs in countries were students are required to learn English as a second language and where English is also the language of instruction. In one of these studies, Elley and Mangubhai implemented a book flood program in the Fijis. Eight rural schools were selected with fourth and fifth graders as the target participants. The researchers tested the hypothesis that children being frequently exposed to high-interest books in the target language would more readily acquire the language. The students participated for eight months, after which they were tested along with a control group, in different language skills. The difference
between the two groups was not great at that time, but after 2 years in the program, the students performed much better in the tests than the control group. However, more importantly, the researchers found that the students in book programs improved in their first language – so the book program was beneficial for language acquisition in all the students’ languages. Other than that, the authors also noted that schoolwork in general improved and that the students improved scores on tests in other subjects as well. This should indicate that if students are subjected to language early and frequently, it benefits other subjects as well.

Similarly to the book flood programs, a Chinese immersion programme studied by Knell et al. (2007) investigated the effects of an early language start of students enrolled into an English immersion programme. 183 participants were tested in different English proficiency skills. The results showed that even though children were immersed in English at an early age, there was no inhibition to their knowledge of Chinese or reading Chinese characters. The immersion-groups scored higher on word recognition, vocabulary and oral skills than students that were not enrolled in the immersion programme. However, the differences between non-immersion students and immersion students disappeared by the end of grade 3.

Furthermore, Fallon and Rublik (2011) scrutinized the impact of a second language on the first language in Canada. The authors studied the implementation of an ESL-programme in the early years (year 1-2), which showed that there was a worry from the public about ESL (English as a second language) taking over French learning. The study was a critical policy study that viewed the policy changes in Quebec making English compulsory in the French-speaking schools. The study consisted of an analysis of policy documents, interviews and archives, in order to see why policy makers had come to the decision of compulsory English. The results showed that the aim of focusing on English in primary years was to achieve bilingual students. Also, the worry of English taking away from learning French (especially reading and writing skills) was not seen as a problem since focus in ESL in grade 1-2 lay on listening and speaking, not on literacy. The results of implementing the new ESL-programme showed that the students had positive views on second language learning.

**Early language start fosters nativelikeness**

In difference to some of the other studies, the results from Foster, Bolibaugh and Kotula’s (2013) study showed only positive effects of an early start. These results stem from the fact
that the study researched the effects of an early start on nativelikeness (achieving pronunciation that is like a native speaker’s) in second language learners. The study was performed on adult bilingual residents of Poland and UK that had at least 12 years of learning English. The study was done through questionnaires on adults’ attitudes, a nativelikeness test and a grammatically judgement test. The results indicate that only an early start (< 12 years old) in an immersion setting guarantees native likeness. Even with an early start, in the EFL context, it was necessary but not sufficient to reach a level of nativelikeness. To attain nativelikeness in EFL-context, the researchers suggest that there is a critical period.

In summary, these studies show that an early language start in EFL instruction may in fact not have a lasting effect compared with late starters. The positive benefits to starting early are more to do with student motivation, a playful access to language to learn and an increase in self-confidence in language use. The findings also show that learning a new language does not inhibit the learner’s ability in other subjects, but may rather help to improve them.
Methodology

To be able to discern the process behind the decision of when to start teaching English in Swedish schools, this research will be done as a qualitative study, through semi-structured interviews with head-teachers. The selected head-teachers are picked from different schools from the same municipality. They differ in size and whether or not they are a state school or free school.

Participants

The schools chosen for this study were all chosen from the same municipality. There are two common types of schools on elementary level in Sweden: state schools and free schools. Free schools govern themselves in accordance to steering documents and general directives from the state. State schools are more governed by what the municipalities they reside under decide.

All schools need to construct an hour-plan where the number of hours for each subject - stipulated by Skolverket - is distributed over the 9 years of elementary school. A free school may decide for themselves when English teaching should start, as long as the number of hours set by Skolverket are filled by the end of year 9. In contrast, municipalities decide if the state schools in their district are to decide for themselves or if they are all to follow guidelines set up by the municipalities. For this study, therefore, one free school and two state schools were chosen.

In addition, the schools selected were of different sizes and were both city schools and rural schools. This selection was made to see if there was any difference in the decision-process depending on the size of the school or setting. I also wanted to have schools with different number of SVA-students (Swedish as a second language-instruction), since this could possibly affect the choice of an early or late start. However, I did not get as many responses from schools as I would have liked, and in the end, only three schools with similar number of SVA-students were chosen.
The head teachers for each school have been chosen as representatives for the schools, and are therefore the participants of this study. Head teacher A is the representative of a small free school, with few SVA-students, based in the city. Since school A is a small school with close work between head master and teacher, the teacher for K-3 has been involved in the decision-making. Therefore, the teacher of school A has been interviewed with the same questions as well. Teacher A is a class teacher for a mixed K-3 class. Head teacher B is the representative of a medium-sized state school, with few SVA-students. The school is based in a rural setting. Head master C is the representative of a medium-sized state school, with few SVA-students. This school is also based in a rural setting.

The selection of schools ensure some comparability as well as some generalizability to other schools in that area. However, as this is a qualitative study with few participants, the results will not be generalizable to all schools in all municipalities.

Materials

This study is constructed as a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews, based on open-ended questions. By using open-ended questions, the answers will be wider and be closer to what a person thinks, than closed questions would. (Mackey and Gass, 2005) Using semi-structured interviews allows the interviewer to ask follow-up questions based on answers by the interviewee, but still maintaining the same core-structure for all interviews ensuring sameness in the research. However, since this is a qualitative study, the answers will show only the chosen school’s responses - which may not be generalizable.

The research question of this study is very broad and many aspects can be covered by it. To be able to answer it, the interview questions needed to be broken down into several categories to help maintain the focus of the study and make the analysis manageable. The questions all seek to elicit responses that reveal the practical issues and concerns that motivated the school’s choice as to when and why students of when students were to start learning English, while avoiding a discussion as to how people felt about these decisions.

The first category of questions asked to what extent the decision was based on research and/or teacher experience. This component covers the main question of what the decision to start is based on. The main reason is to see whether schools have looked outside the school for research that supports their thoughts. Also, if head-teachers are in charge of the decision, it
will be of importance if they allow their teachers to affect the decision. It is often hard to make a decision if the teachers who are to execute it are not comfortable or agree with it.

The second category of questions examined the policy maker’s view on the Positive and negative effects of an early language start. Since research shows that there really aren’t any long-term effects of an early language start on the language acquisition, it will be interesting to see if head-teachers share this opinion or not. Also, whether one sees negative or positive effects, should directly affect the decision of when to start.

The third category looked into the view on any effects of an early language start on SVA-students. In Sweden, as in many countries, there are students with other mother tongues than Swedish. They may newly have arrived in Sweden or have lived here long, and may have different struggles with their different languages. If a head-teacher sees negative effects of these students starting English before they have mastered their Swedish, this might affect their decision to start. Depending on whether they see languages as “working together” or that they need to come one after the other, will affect whether or not they will decide for an early language start or not.

The fourth category asked the interviewees to what extent the new law of only certified teachers teaching has affected the schools. This component covers the practical side of when students should start. As of June 2015, only certified teachers are allowed to teach the different subjects. The goal of this component is to see whether this change has affected the age of when students should start? Do schools need to change their decision or their organisation to be able to cope with this requirement?

The fifth and last category deals with the issue of children starting at different ages and whether this could mean un-equal schooling. Skolverket promotes an equal school for all, so this component looks at whether or not schools have considered looking at what other schools decide before making their own decision to ensure that students may not fall behind if they should change schools.

The list of questions (Appendix 1) were constructed to ensure sameness in the interviews and to make them comparable.
Procedure

All interviews were conducted as telephone-interviews. This was a conscious choice since the intended interviewees were all head teachers that are very busy and have little time to set apart for interviews. To ensure enough interviews in the short time set for this study (10 weeks), the choice of telephone interviews was made in preference to face-to-face interviews. In addition, since the intention was not to find out how the interviewees felt about the subject, but rather the thought process behind the decisions, it was not important to analyse body language, facial expressions or tone of voice. However, not being face-to-face with the interviewee meant I did not have any chance of interpreting body language and facial expressions that might have revealed necessary follow-up questions. It also meant that it was harder to have a flowing conversation that might have revealed more information. However, given the time for this study, the telephone interview was my choice.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed as well as notes taken during the interview. They all started with the two questions (see Appendix 1 for the questions) regarding who decides when English starts and what thoughts lay behind the decisions. After that the other questions were answered in conversation, either spontaneously by the interviewee or brought on through follow-up questions to cover the components mentioned above.

The interviews took around 30 minutes to conduct. All interviewees were asked the same questions and also asked to give a demographic description of their school. As well as asking the head-teachers of the 3 selected schools, one teacher was interviewed as well. The teacher was responsible for K-3 and had set the timetable for all three grades, which the head-teacher had then approved – therefore, her thoughts were also valuable for the final decision of the school’s hour-plan.

The interviews were transcribed afterwards, and this was compared with the notes taken during the interview to see if anything was overlooked or interpreted in different ways. The four interviews were then analysed against the components derived from the research question, as well as compared with each other and the synthesized research in the background-section of this paper.

Both questions and interviews were conducted in Swedish. To ensure correctness in quotations, all quotes by interviewees are entered as transcribed in Swedish and then
translated to English in the results section below. Translations are placed within [ ] directly after the quotes.
Results and Discussion

Decision based on research

All three head teachers answered that they decided themselves when students should start learning English and that this was in year 1. There seemed to be a general assumption with both teachers and head-teachers that “ju tidigare, desto bättre” [the earlier, the better] is appropriate when it comes to language instruction in general and English instruction in particular. All four interviewees answered this when asked why they had decided to start English instruction from earliest age possible. Head teacher A contributed this to the statement that “Du är ju språkmottaglig när du är ett barn” [you are more susceptible to language as a child)]. However, none of the head teachers could explain where this assumption came from, nor could they point to any particular research on early language start. The head master of school B stated that “Det känns som att det är allmänt vedertaget att det är så det är…” [it feels like this is the universally accepted truth, that that is the way it is (the sooner the better)].

Head teachers B and C were also quick to point out that teaching languages at a young age should be done playfully through games, songs and rhymes: “Å därför finns ingen anledning att vänta tycker jag, utan att man börjar, men gör det på ett lite lättasamt och leckfullt sätt i början” (School B) [and that’s why I don’t feel like there is any reason to wait, but to start, but doing it in an easy and playful manner in the beginning.]; ”för att börja leka in och göra lite naturligt” (School C) [to start playing the language and make it natural]. However, when asked about the background to this statement, both head-teachers based it on personal belief and a general assumption that research supports it. None of them could point to any specific research. Head teacher C compared learning a language with learning to ride a bike: “lite grann den principen att ju tidigare man börjar cykla, desto lättare kan du det sen. Det är mer naturligt.” [A bit like the principle that the earlier you start to ride a bike, the easier it becomes later on. It is more natural]. Teacher A also pointed out that the same principle goes for learning to read: ”hört snarare än läst forskning att ju mer man har med sig från tidig ålder det har du med dig på ett helt annat plan än när du är 13-14, t.ex. att läsa” [heard rather than read research that the more you have with you from an early age, that’s what will stay with you at a whole other level when you are 13-14 years old, for example reading]. These assumptions show an interesting trend in schools and reflect the thoughts and statements of
officials around Europe as well: the earlier you start language instruction, the better for children. However, the “better” part in this statement is rather undefined. According to the research presented in the previous section, the lasting, positive effects actually do not have anything to do with language acquisition but rather, a general improvement of attitudes, motivation and students’ self-confidence. So, the “better” part that the schools are looking for are of ‘soft values’ rather than educational results. This could be the reason why head teachers and teachers find it difficult to point to any specific effects of an early start. In addition, it is well to bear in mind the fact that there is very little research done on English instruction in K-3 in Sweden and the effect of early language instruction in these settings. The research presented in this study all refer to studies done in other countries. Teachers and head teachers might find these studies hard to apply in Swedish schools. However, as stated, Swedish head teachers are not alone in these assumptions. As presented in the introduction, a European legislation has promoted an early language start – even though the research on the effects of an early start are inconclusive.

But are the ‘soft values’ of increase in motivation, interest, positive attitudes and self-confidence not enough to make it worth starting at an early age, even though the effects of language acquisition evens out with late starters? According to the head teachers and teacher, these appear to be enough grounds to make an early start worthwhile and show that it is not always the educational results that are the most important. According to the steering documents, Swedish schools are responsible for fostering individuals with a lifelong desire to learn - which also includes languages. Therefore, an early start may not help students to better reach the knowledge requirements stated in the curriculum, but it will see to the fundamental values that the curriculum is based on.

Teachers’ influence in the decision

When asked if teachers were involved in the decision-making, two head teachers answered that they were, but to different extents.

Teacher A made the initial plan of how many hours should be spent on the subject in each grade and this was then revised with the head-teacher in order for the represented school to fill the required hours. The amount of hours spent in K-3 at that school resulted in the school exceeding the hours recommended by Skolverket. The head teacher stated that”Det betyder att
In the present time we fill 120% of the 100% of hours that we should. Teacher A added that "if there hadn't been any hours in year 1, I would have added it myself." These two statements indicate that English is considered important in general in the school and in K-3 in particular, but also that the teacher’s thoughts and experiences weigh heavy in the decision-making.

Head teacher B answered that the teachers’ wishes and thoughts had been taken into account, but primarily the head-teacher relied on discussions with six other head-teachers in the district. Their aim is to have as close to similar hour-plans as possible in all subjects. Head teacher C also answered that the decision was made in the district, with other head teachers. In both these state schools it appears that it was more important to have equal planning in all state schools, than looking at the individual schools and teachers’ wishes. The difference between schools B and C compared to school A is that school A is a clearly smaller school which only governs itself. Head teacher A commented that "It is the benefit of being a small school that everyone gets to help decide." A small, free school may have greater opportunities for discussions with the teachers, while bigger, state schools may have requirements from above to discuss amongst the schools instead of within. Either discussion is relevant: one for the inclusion of teacher experience, and the other to maintain an equal school for all.

Positive or negative effects of an early start

As mentioned in the above sections, none of the head teachers could point to any research on the effects of an early start. The ideas around starting from year 1 were more of ‘the sooner, the better’. However, when asked if there were any negative effects of starting language instruction early, none of the head teachers knew of any. Head teacher C was clear in answering this question: “No, I do not see that. Quite on the contrary, it is positive since children are spontaneous and can learn playfully.”

Teacher A reasoned that some might say that a second language would inhibit Swedish, but that was not something that she had ever seen.
None of the head teachers could see any negative effects of starting early, something that corresponds with the presented studies in this paper. Even if the positive effects on language acquisition wear off as children grow older, the studies do not actually show any negative effects of an early start. Most interesting here is that the active teacher agrees with these views based on experience with students.

**Effects on first and second language acquisition**

When asked whether they could see any issues of learning a second or third language before having mastered their first, none of the head teachers found that there was an issue. They did not find problems with SVA-students learning many languages at once, whether English was their second, third or even fourth languages. Head teacher A stated that it was only positive for a child to have more than one language going at the same time. Teacher A told of a student that had newly arrived in Sweden, who partook of the same English instruction as the rest of the class and met the same requirements. The teacher explains this by “Jag skulle inte förvänta mig mindre av dem.” [I wouldn’t expect anything less of them]. Head teacher C agrees with this view which can be seen in the statement: ”vi har nog den inställningen att det är inte farligt att lära sig flera språk tidigt, det är ju bara ett mångfacetterat kommunikationssätt.” [We have an approach that there is no danger to learning many languages at the same time, it is just a multi-faceted way of communicating] The four interviewees’ answers indicate that they do not see the need of waiting with English instruction for SVA-students, but rather that learning different languages give the students different ways of communicating. Head teacher C connects this to the communicative view on languages that is seen in the steering documents:”det är ju samma som med svenskan, fokus ligger ju inte på grammatiskt korrekthet utan det är ju det kommunikativa, både i tal och skrift som vi bygger på” [it’s the same thing as with Swedish, focus isn’t on grammatical correctness but rather the communicative that we build on, both in speech and writing.]

When asked about the effects of learning English on the children’s first language (either Swedish or other), only head teacher A had seen anything that could be connected to that. The head teacher expressed some concern that had been voiced by parents of SVA-students: “Det är väl mer föräldrarna som är oroliga […] Det är ju en hemkänsla att man vill ha kvar språket” [It is more a concern from parents […] it is a feeling from home that you want to keep your language]. Parents were sometimes concerned that their children were loosing their first
language. However, this was a general concern and not to do with students learning yet another language (English).

The head teachers’ view on this issue corresponds with the findings in Fallon and Rublik’s (2011) presented above, where concern was voiced about students first language being impaired by introducing English. However, both the schools interviewed here and in the study showed that learning a second language can improve rather than impair a first language.

Practical issues and competent teachers

With the new demand from the government that only certified teachers are allowed to teach, there might be an issue for schools to find competent and certified teacher. However, none of the interviewees found any issues with this demand when it came to teachers for English in K-3. All three schools have enough teachers at the moment to enable English instruction from year 1.

However, head-teacher B admitted that it might cause problems further along if there was a change in the staff. The region has a plan for solving these issues by collecting all the available teachers in that municipality so that changes between schools can be made to cover any shortage of teachers. However, concern was voiced over the fact that teachers in the past 10 years have odd subject-combinations in their certificates and may not be certified to teach subjects that the schools are after. The head teacher implies that this might affect English as well: “Och får man många såna lärare så, eh, så kan det så klart bli problem, så det behöver man ju titta på.” [and if we get many teachers like that, then, well then there might of course be a problem, so that is something we would have to look into.]

Head teacher A did not have a problem for teaching K-3 in his represented school, however, finding teachers for the higher grades seemed to be a problem at the moment. The head teacher admitted that “Jo, det påverkar ju oss” [yes, this does affect us].

Head teacher C on the other hand, did not see this as a problem. The head teacher stated that it is the school’s policy to start English instruction from year 1, so "hade vi inte haft kompetensen så hade vi nog försökt skaffa oss den. Och se till att vi hade behörig personal på den posten.” [if we didn’t have the competency we would have tried to get it. To make sure we had certified teachers to fill the post.]
These answers show the vulnerability of being a small, free school. The benefits are that they govern themselves and can include all teachers in decision-making, as stated above, but they do not have the security of other schools and larger resources to rely on. However, all schools manage to fill the posts now and they all indicate that teaching English from year 1 is important to them. Therefore, as head teacher C suggests, the issue of finding teachers should not make them change their language policies.

An equal school for all?

Skolverket promotes an equal school for all, as presented in the introduction. However, if students all start at different ages, are they offered equal education? Moreover, what happens if they change schools – will they miss out or fall behind in English? When asked about this, the head teachers had some different answers.

According to head teachers B and C, being larger state schools, they both discussed with the schools in their district so that their hour-plans were constructed in the same way. By doing this they ensure that children can change schools within the district without missing anything. However, they added that it really should not be a problem. Head teacher C states that "Vi börjar ju med engelskan, en halvtimme i veckan, […] så det gör ju inte jättemycket om inte man har haft detta tidigt, utan man får ju mer sen ändå." [we start with English 30 minutes/week […] so it doesn’t matter a lot if you don’t start early, you get more later]. Head teacher B agrees with this in the comment “men det är nog inte så vanligt [att elever missar engelska], utan när det gäller engelska så blir det ju oftast mer tid i takt med att eleverna blir äldre.”[but that is probably not very common [that students fall behind in English], but when it comes to English more time is spent on it as the students get older.]. The head teacher also adds that ”så är ju målen samma, så till årskurs 3 så har du ju mål för vad barnen ska kunna behärsha i engelska.” [the goals are the same, so for year 3 there are goals that the students need to achieve in English]. Both head teachers find that there should not be an issue if children change schools, both because all students have the same goals to achieve in year 3 regardless of the year you start and also because the amount of time spent on English in the first few years is so very little.

Head teacher of school A, on the other hand, agreed with the idea that all schools should start English instruction at the same time to ensure an equal school for all: "så att man har med sig
ungefär samma kunskap om man nu ska byta av en anledning” [so that you have the same knowledge if you want to change for some reason]. However, the head teacher has not had this in mind when placing instruction start in year 1, nor have they had discussions with other schools.

Teacher A also adds that even if students all have the same core content to cover by the end of year 3, there will be shorter time to cover them the later students start with English instruction. By starting from year 1, there is time to do this.

The problem with leaning on the idea of all students reaching the same goals by the end of year 3 is that there are no knowledge requirements in the steering documents until year 6. Teachers only need to cover the core content for years 1-3; however, if students start later, the core contents may be covered but not to the same degree as for students who start from year 1. However, here is where the inconclusive research on an early language start comes in. What students miss by starting late, they might make up for by being able to learn language in a different and more effective way by being able to analyse language. So a student who has not had any language instruction in his or her previous school changes to a school where they have an early start, might be able to make up for it by learning language in a different way. The solution to any problems that might arise in such a situation would always be that teachers have to be aware of all their students’ abilities, where they are at and what they need to do to achieve what they do. As stated before, Swedish schools foster individuals, and individuals all need individual goals and instruction to succeed.
Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find at which age schools decide English instruction should start and what they base this decision on. The four interviewees representing the three schools answered quite similarly to the questions with only some exceptions. The decision at all schools was to start English language instruction from year 1, in a playful manner with games, songs and rhymes. The general feeling by all interviewees seems to be that the earlier language instruction starts, the better. This assumption has not been based on any specific research, but rather something, that is a ‘universal truth’. This corresponds with the view on English that is found in the rest of Europe, with a European legislation promoting early language starts for second and third languages. Only one of the head teachers took teacher’s experiences into account and none of the schools found that learning Swedish as a second language should come before learning English for students that are newly arrived in Sweden. There also appears to be an attitude at all schools that having many languages is not a bad thing, but rather something that is promoted.

These findings show that English is a language and subject that is prioritized, since head teachers choose an early start even though they don’t have to and even though they don’t have any specific research to back their argument. The answer to the question posed by this paper is therefore that schools promote English and base their decision to start early on a generally accepted assumption that earlier is better. Since two of the head teachers state that they have made this decision together with other schools, then the schools in this region should all have the same language policies and base their decisions on the same grounds. However, even though this might be generalizable to this region, the answers only come from three different schools. Since I have heard concerns voiced in other schools and from other regions that students should focus on learning to read and write in Swedish before learning yet another language, these three head teachers cannot be representatives for the rest of the country. This study may show an indication as to how some schools may reason, but it is flawed in that it only represents one idea. It would have been beneficial and given the discussion more depth if more schools had been included, especially schools with different points of view on the subject of English.

For my own future teacher career, this study shows the importance of backing my decisions with research. Personally, I can agree with the schools in this study, that earlier is better.
However, it gives the decision more credibility if it can be backed with why earlier is better. This is especially important if I am employed at a school that has a different view on when English instruction should start than my own. Being sure of what research says and what benefits there are with an early start will help me argue for something I believe in.

For all schools it would be beneficial if more research on English instruction in K-3 was conducted here in Sweden. For this paper it was hard to find research that was relevant and up to date, so I can understand if schools, head teachers and teachers alike, find it difficult to base their decisions on research. In addition, as stated in the introduction, the synthesis of research done across Europe found that results on the effects of an early start were inconclusive. So, we might not find any answer to whether or not starting early is positive. However, if all that comes of it is an increase in my students’ motivation, their interest and self-confidence, then that is more than enough to convince me that an early language start is beneficial.
References

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Appendix 1

Interview questions in English

- Do you decide at the school when students start learning English or do you have directives from somewhere else?
- The decision at your school/in your region for when to start teaching, what is it based on?
  - What were the thoughts behind it?
    - Was there a discussion leading up to the decision?
    - Did you take into account any tried and tested experience by teachers?
    - Who was involved in the discussions? (teachers, officials)
    - Was there an interpretation of Lgr11 or other steering documents for the decision?
  - To what extent was the decision based on research?
    - Research on L1 vs L2
    - Research on benefits of an early start vs no benefits
  - To what extent was the decision based on more practical reasons (available teachers, class-sizes, available resources)?
  - To what extent was the decision based on the theory that students need to focus on Swedish before learning English? (English being less prioritized)
  - Skolverket promotes an equal school for all: have you taken this into account in your decision process?
    - Have schools in other municipalities (or the same if school decides for itself) been investigated to see when they start?
    - Can students change from one school to another without falling behind in their language acquisition?
  - With the implementation of the new curriculum and the new law that only certified teachers are allowed to teach, has there been a change in your policies?
    - Are there any problems with the amount of available teachers certified to teach English in K-3 that make teaching from year 1 impossible?
Intervjufrågor på svenska / Interview questions in Swedish

- Bestämmer ni på er skola själva när eleverna börjar undervisas i Engelska eller har ni direktiv någon annanstans ifrån?
- Beslutet på er skola, vad är det grundat på?
  - Vad var tankarna bakom det beslutet?
    - Fanns det någon diskussion bakom beslutet?
    - Tog ni del av någon beprövad erfarenhet av lärare för att ta beslutet?
    - Vilka var delaktiga i beslutet? (lärare, beslutsfattare)
    - Fanns det någon tolkning av Lgr11 eller andra styrdokument inför beslutet?
  - Till hur stor del var beslutet baserat på forskning?
    - Förstaspråksinlärning jämfört med andraspråksinlärning
    - För- eller nackdelar med tidig språkstart.
  - Till hur stor del var beslutet grundat på mer praktiska frågor?
    - Antal lärare, klassorganisation eller tillgängliga undervisnings-resurser
  - Till hur stor del var beslutet grundat på antagandet att elever måste lära sig svenska ordentligt innan man introducerar ett nytt språk?
  - Skolverket lyfter en likvärdig skola för alla: har ni funderat över detta i ert beslut?
    - Har ni tittat på andra skolor/kommuner i er närhet och jämfört?
    - Kan en elev som byter skola hämmas i sitt språktillägnande på grund av beslutet?
  - Med de nya direktiven om att endast legitimerade/behöriga lärare ska undervisa i ämnet, har ni behövt ändra i era beslut?
    - Finns det någon konsekvens av antalet behöriga lärare i Engelska för just F-3 som gör att undervisning i ämnet från åk 1 inte är möjlig?