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Teaching English in Mixed-ability Classrooms
Some teachers’ thoughts on responding to the needs of all learners

Att undervisa engelska för elever med olika förmågor
Några lärares tankar om att tillmötesgå olika elevers behov

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ABSTRACT

Our aim was to investigate teachers’ perceptions on how they meet pupils’ needs in a mixed-ability context. Through semi-structured interviews, we listened to experienced teachers and analyzed their different ways of approaching mixed-ability classrooms.

We interviewed three teachers of English from a secondary school and four from an upper secondary school. Our findings show that varied instruction is the best way to meet all pupils’ needs and that it is necessary to have extra materials for both advanced and less able students. Our interviewees also highlighted the importance of continuous assessment and the need to individualize as much as possible.

There is a variety of strategies that can be put into practice in order to meet all pupils’ needs, but unfortunately, no “magic method” guarantees every pupil’s development and success with regard to learning.

Key words: mixed-ability, student’s needs, individualization, development
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1 INTRODUCTION

The overwhelming majority of classrooms are made up of mixed-ability groups. In every classroom pupils have different needs and learning styles; there are upper secondary learners who can read and comprehend almost as well as university students, learners who can hardly understand basic information and learners who fall somewhere between these two extremes. This heterogeneity may enrich the variety of social interaction among pupils, but it also creates situations that challenge teachers’ resourcefulness while trying to give every student an opportunity to learn and succeed, as stated in the curriculum (Lpo 94, p.6).

As teachers to be, we are going to face the same challenge on an everyday basis. Therefore we believe it is of great relevance to learn what experienced educators think about how different learner needs can be met.

1.1 BACKGROUND

Ever since we started as student teachers we have experienced mixed-ability classrooms. In such classrooms, students of the same age vary in their intellectual, physical and emotional development. The developmental diversity that exists in any secondary and/or upper secondary school demands that teachers are able to reflect on the situation and take action, they must be capable to use strategies that make it possible for all students to experience success by means of applying the ideal mentioned in the curriculum under the heading An Equivalent Education, “teaching shall be adapted to every pupil’s conditions and needs” (Lpo 94, p.6).

During our practice we have seen educators approaching the mixed-ability phenomenon from different angles. But we have also noticed that some teachers saw the best way to teach in these heterogeneous classrooms as “teaching to the middle” leaving struggling students behind, and failing to engage advanced students.

Since teachers have to attend to different learner needs, interests and modes of learning, we undertook to read about mixed-ability classrooms in order to learn about existing methods and
the complexities involved in teaching such groups. In the process, we came across several pedagogical concepts such as differentiation, learner autonomy and individualization.

At first, we conceived our research in a rather broad manner; we wanted to write a study that covered every aspect of the process of teaching English to a mixed-ability class: not only investigating different theories, but also observing and analyzing the ways teachers applied them. We even thought about devising some sort of template that could be used for grouping students according to their learner profiles. This far too ambitious idea was soon discarded. The limited time available to us made us reconsider the framework, narrow down our aims and adjust the purpose of our dissertation in a way that could guarantee the feasibility of our project without losing its essence.

1.2 PURPOSE and RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We had the dilemma of teaching English in a mixed-ability classroom as our target, but the focus had to be narrower. Consequently, we thought the best way to carry out our research was to ask the teachers. Focusing on investigating teachers’ thoughts concerning their approach to the dilemma gave us the opportunity to explore the strategies they use and to get a closer understanding of their everyday teaching reality. This main focus inevitably expanded further into other issues we wanted to explore from the teacher’s perspective:

How do teachers try to meet the needs of all pupils?

What kind of strategies do teachers use to integrate poor learners into the larger group without disregarding the need to encourage and motivate top achievers?

What do teachers do to assess quiet pupils’ communicative skills?

These questions are intrinsically linked to our main objective and engine of our study and, hence, worthy of a deeper analysis. These interlinked questions led to the purpose of our work: to investigate teachers’ perceptions of how they meet different pupils’ needs in a mixed-ability context.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the course of our investigation we came across a number of authors who shed some light on concepts we wanted to clarify due to the significance they have for teachers aiming to meet all pupils’ needs.

Our interviewees indicated that it is important to acknowledge that there is a number of factors involved in the learning process, e.g. aptitude and motivation. Those learner factors, together with the fact that pupils approach content differently depending on their learning style, influence teachers’ chances of planning meaningful lessons.

2.1 LEARNER FACTORS

To find out which strategies are the most beneficial for pupils’ language development it is important to have in mind different aspects of second language acquisition. In How languages are learned by Lightbown and Spada (2002), it is explained that research has demonstrated that an individual’s age is one characteristic that determines the way a pupil approaches a second language. It is most often claimed that our capacity to learn a language is at its peak before puberty. The biologist Eric Lenneberg first introduced the Critical Period Hypothesis, which was later adopted by linguists like Chomsky. This hypothesis suggests that “there is a time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning” (Lightbown and Spada, 2002. p.60). Therefore, in order to make pupils succeed in their language development, it is necessary to create the foundation of a foreign language at an early age and to attract and keep pupils’ interest in the language.
2.1.1 APTITUDE

“Learning quickly is the distinguishing feature of aptitude” (Lightbown and Spada, 2002. p.53). Aptitude is a cognitive process that has been widely investigated in the form of tests, in order to predict whether individuals will be competent learners of a second language. The common view of aptitude is that it is composed of four different abilities such as the ability to identify and memorize new sounds, understand the function of words, figure out grammatical rules from particular samples and to have a good memory for new vocabulary.

Not all pupils tend to be successful in all these abilities, some may be better at acquiring new words and others may be successful in figuring out the function of grammatical rules. Nevertheless, knowing learners’ strengths and weaknesses may be positive as it can help children attain a higher level of achievement. It can as well be used to guide learners in their choice of programmes and teachers in their choice of learning methods.

2.1.2 MOTIVATION AND ATTITUDE

Motivation and positive attitude are also important factors when it comes to succeeding in a second language (Lightbown and Spada, 2002). One major question that arises within this area is if pupils tend to be more motivated because they are successful or if they are successful because they are motivated. In 1972, Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert claimed that there were two types of motivation. They called the first one integrative motivation, linking it to personal development, and the second one instrumental motivation, which is involved in learning for practical reasons (Lightbown and Spada, 2002. p.56). During our time as teachers, we have noticed that students who have high scores are often the most motivated ones and are very interested in keeping their good results. Thus, their motivation appears to be mostly instrumental.

This means that to evaluate the importance of the target language the pupil must have special reasons, for example to fulfil professional ambitions, or to gain better interaction with his/hers surrounding. In this way, the pupil will be more interested and motivated to acquire proficiency. In other words, teaching has to be “authentic,” which means that teachers have to design the tasks based on students’ abilities, interests and experiences to fit their needs (Brown, 2002. p.28).
Moreover, if pupil’s attitudes are positive towards the speakers of the language they will desire more occasions to communicate and interact. According to Krashen, it is through a positive disposition towards the target language that acquisition takes place (Lightbown and Spada, 2002. pp.38-40).

Another aspect to have in mind when it comes to attitudes and motivation is that pupils who are exposed to forced input in a second language may have their internal motivation restrained and the attitudes towards the language and its acquisition could develop negatively. In order to avoid that it is essential for teachers to be able to create a positive learning environment:

> If we can make our classrooms places where students enjoy coming because the content is interesting and relevant to their age and level of ability, where the learning goals are challenging yet manageable and clear, and where the atmosphere is supportive and non-threatening, we can make a positive contribution to students’ motivation to learn. (Lightbown and Spada, 2002. p.57)

### 2.2 LEARNING STYLES

All children learn in different manners or have certain learning styles. The term “learning style” refers to the way in which pupils approach information. It describes how they absorb, process and retain new facts and details. This area also comprises a cognitive style where a distinction is made between *field independent* and *field dependent*. This refers to whether an individual approaches a matter holistically or separates the details from the general background. Other categories of learning styles are also based on a pupil’s personality and temperament but little research has been done to discover if these aspects are important tools for achieving success in a second language.

There are pupils who must have the information in front of them to learn: these pupils fall under the category of “visual” learners. “Kinesthetic” are those who must add physical action into their learning. Another group of pupils are those who have the ability to just listen to information once
or twice, these are referred to as “aural” learners. Moreover, many learners have strong beliefs about the nature of information and how it should be conveyed. From previous learning experiences and assumptions they are often certain of which strategies are best for their learning. In addition, these learner beliefs have been proven to be strong reconciling factors in learners’ experiences in the classroom.

2.2.1 HOWARD GARDNER’S INTELLIGENCES

Other factors that might be decisive for pupils’ success in language learning are Howard Gardner’s seven intelligences. In his book *Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1993) he puts forward that people use at least seven autonomous intellectual competences that are involved in the learning processes. These are:

1. Linguistic intelligence – Pupils with this kind of intelligence take pleasure in writing, reading and speaking. They have “sensitivity to the different functions of language” (p.77).

2. Logical-Mathematical intelligence – These pupils are interested in structure, patterns and relationships within books and materials. They are drawn to arithmetic games and like to recognize and solve significant problems (pp.128-170).

3. Kinesthetic intelligence – “Characteristics of this intelligence is the ability to use one’s body in highly differentiated and skilled ways” (p.206). As mentioned before, these learners process knowledge more easily through corporal sensations.

4. Spatial intelligence – is the ability to perceive a form or an object in its full dimensional form. These pupils think in images and symbols. They tend to mentally recognize the transformation of an object into another effortlessly (pp. 174-176).
5. Musical intelligence – Musical learners often express themselves through music or rhythmic movements. They usually distinguish different sounds others may disregard and they sing with “greater accuracy and expressivity” (p.109).

6. Interpersonal intelligence – A learner who possesses interpersonal intelligence has the “ability to notice and make distinctions among other individuals” (p. 239), especially among their moods and intentions. They usually have a leader’s attributes, are good at communicating and detecting others temperament and desires.

7. Intrapersonal intelligence – The core capacity of this area is: access to one’s own feeling life (p.239). For pupils it involves understanding their inner world of emotions and affects. They usually have the ability to control their feelings.

### 2.3 APPROACHES

Different educators approach the challenge of teaching a mixed-ability group from different angles. In the books we have consulted we have come across some pedagogical approaches that we considered important to successfully meet all students’ needs, and although they sometimes overlap with each other, we believe they all deserve to be mentioned as independent procedures. At our secondary school, they have introduced a working form called “learner autonomy” which comprises several teaching techniques; therefore, we have decided to include it in this chapter.
2.3.1 DIFFERENTIATION

Ever since the end of the Second World War there has been an ongoing political and pedagogical debate about whether to apply differentiation in the compulsory school system or not.

Politicians have been divided, conservative ones advocating for and liberals against the idea of differentiation, but what is differentiation in education settings?

According to Pedagogisk uppslagsbok differentiation means “the division of a unit into several parts. The opposite to integration” (1996. p. 116), i.e. to adapt instruction to respond to the diverse student needs found in mixed-ability classrooms.

There is no recipe for differentiation. Teachers construct differentiated classrooms in varying ways depending on their own personalities, the nature of the subject and grade level they teach, and the learning profiles of their students.

These teachers have at least two things in common, however: a conviction that students differ in their learning needs, and a belief that classrooms in which students are active learners, decision makers, and problem solvers are more natural and effective than those in which students are passive recipients of information.(Tomlinson, 2001, p.27)

There simply is no single learning pattern for the general school class. If, as we have explained, students differ in academic readiness, interest, and learning profiles, and if a good school attempts to meet each student where he or she is and encourage continual development, an equitable model of instruction in which all students are expected to be doing or learning the same thing at the same time makes little sense. To a certain extent, differentiated instruction seems a better solution for meeting the mixed-ability groups that characterize Swedish schools. (http://www.pcoe.k12.ca.us/curriculum/diff_instruction.html, 23-11-2005)
A differentiated classroom offers a range of learning options designed according to different readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles. The teacher uses a variety of ways for students to explore content, a variety of comprehension activities or processes through which students can come to understand and acquire information and ideas, and a variety of options through which students can demonstrate what they have learned.

(http://www.pcoe.k12.ca.us/curriculum/diff_instruction.html, 23-11-2005)

According to Tomlinson (2001) a differentiated classroom has the following characteristics:

1. **Instruction is concept centred and principle driven:** “Lessons for all students should emphasize critical and creative thinking” (p. 20). By these means all learners have the chance to discover and apply the essential concepts of the subject in study. This kind of instruction accentuates understanding rather than memorization of bits of information.

2. **Continuous assessment of student competence and development:** “Assessment invites us to adjust our teaching based on current information” (p. 20). Teachers do not take for granted that all students need a given task, instead they assess their readiness continuously, providing support when needed and allowing “fast finishers” to move ahead.

3. **Flexible grouping is used systematically:** students work in many patterns; sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs and sometimes in groups.

4. **Whole-group instruction** is mostly used for introducing new ideas or for sharing learning outcomes.

5. **Students are active explorers:** instruction is student centred and the teacher is more of a guide than a deliverer of information.
2.3.2 INDIVIDUALIZATION

Individualization is a familiar concept to most of today’s teachers. However it took some years before it became broadly accepted as a didactical approach.

We were probably onto something important in the ’70s when we experimented with what we then called individualized instruction. At least we understood that students have different learning profiles and that there is merit in meeting students where they are and helping them move on from there. (Tomlinson, 2001. p 2)

According to Pedagogisk Uppslagsbok, it was a little bit earlier, in the 60’s that educational theorists understood that every pupil acquires and processes information according to their individual learning style (Pedagogisk Uppslagsbok, 1996 pp. 269-271). Consequently, individualized education became a fundamental issue in modern pedagogy. As in differentiation, teachers who individualize instruction are “committed to the potential of the individuals” (Bartlett, Burton and Peim, 2004 p.162).

Although most teachers would argue in favour of individualization, that is to say, the adaptation of instruction to every single student, some questions may become problematic: 1- Individualization can demand that pupils within the same classroom have to deal with different contents, which might shorten the amount of time teachers can devote to each and every student; 2- Since students work individually this kind of instruction can result in a decrease in social interaction and, hence, in unfavourable communicative conditions.
2.3.3 LEARNER AUTONOMY

The educational concept learner autonomy (LA) was, as mentioned before, relatively new to us and came to be an important part of our work since the organisation of year seven, eight and nine at the secondary school we investigated was very much connected to this manner of approaching and teaching English.

The term learner autonomy, as we know it today, was coined by Henri Holec in 1988 as a way of describing teaching that is characterized by students’ self-regulation (Tornberg, 2000). In a report he wrote for the Council of Europe, Holec stated that:

To take charge of one's learning means to be responsible for all the decisions related to the learning process. In other words, learners take an active role in

- determining the objectives or goals
- selecting the content
- deciding on the methods and techniques they will use
  - monitoring the process
- evaluating what has been learned


For the European Council, knowledge in a foreign language seems the “natural way to international solidarity and intercultural understanding” (Tornberg, p.71). For Tornberg, society needs autonomous thinkers who can achieve democratic ideals, and that is why the reflective and meta-cognitive attributes that inspire LA are, even though they are not directly mentioned in the curriculum, most recommended not only in language learning, but in every school subject.

In Scharle and Szabós’ book Learner autonomy (2000), the word autonomy is being defined as the “freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs which entail the right to make decisions as well” (p.4). The main objective for an LA-English teacher is to make learners aware of, and responsible for their own language acquisition. Teachers have to make students develop a sense of self-discipline and encourage them to take an active part in making their own decisions regarding their learning.
3 METHOD

Since we were interested in teachers’ perceptions, it became obvious that the best strategy for collecting data for our project was through semi-structured interviews. Consequently, listening to experienced teachers and analyzing the different ways they approach the mixed-ability classroom were the fundamental tools on which we based our work.

3.1 DATA COLLECTION

As Hatch explains in Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings (2002), formal qualitative interviews “are special kinds of conversations that are used to explore informants’ experiences and interpretations” (p.91). As a result of such conversations, teachers’ perspectives on a subject may remain undamaged by potential misinterpretations. However, bearing in mind that according to qualitative paradigms there is no objective reality, we have to accept that our interpretation of teachers’ answers involves a dose of subjectivity.

Unlike quantitative researchers, whose interviews are mostly closed-ended surveys with yes/no questions, we chose an approach that required us to listen through a series of semi-structured and extended conversations: we brought a number of guiding questions to the interviews, but we were open to follow the leads of the interviewees into further areas they could consider worth mentioning (Hatch, 2002 pp. 23 and 94). This flexibility in the structure of the interviews generated information we otherwise could not have anticipated, and allowed a sense of easiness throughout the conversations.


3.2 THE INTERVIEWEES

We had the opportunity of interviewing seven teachers: three from a secondary school and four from an upper-secondary school. All seven teachers have long teaching experience varying from 10 to 26 years. For reasons of anonymity we have given them fictitious names:

The secondary school teachers are:

Karin has taught English and Swedish for 25 years.
Linus is a teacher of English and French. He has 15 years of teaching experience.
Maria has taught German, Swedish and English for 10 years.

The upper secondary school teachers are:

Malin has taught Latin, French and English since 1979.
Emilia is a teacher of English and Swedish. She has been teacher for 32 years.
Ana has worked as a teacher for 16 years, both in secondary and upper secondary schools. Her main subjects are English and social sciences.
Stefan has been a teacher for 26 years, and his subjects are Swedish and English.

Our sampling strategy was based on selecting teachers that had long experience teaching English and, for this reason, able to give us valuable and relevant information.

In secondary school we knew that the language teachers had different working methods. Linus works with “Learner Autonomy.” He is, in other words, in charge of pupils who have been given the chance to work at their own pace and more independently. Karin follows what we could call a more “traditional” way of teaching; i.e. she uses, to a certain extent, teacher centred instruction where content is not always “authentic”. Maria has fewer pupils in her group; these children move slowly through the course and often need extra support.

With small variations, the upper secondary teachers used the same pattern: they set the lessons’ tempo, giving some place for controlled discussions and providing a fairly broad range of tasks.
Using a variety of work forms enables teachers to handle the dilemma of having diverse knowledge levels within a class; therefore it was extremely important for us to listen to the teachers’ experiences.

To perform the interviews we used 14 open questions which we had divided into seven categories or domains in order to structure and simplify the later analysis. The domains we came up with were what we considered the key topics of our research: *language development, silent and/or the shy ones, slow and the advanced learners, reading and writing difficulties, assessment, learner autonomy* and *streaming*.

### 3.3 PROCEDURE

The interviews took approximately 45 minutes. In order to maximize their quality, the interviewees had previously been provided with an *information sheet* which allowed them to know what our research was going to be about, as well as a guarantee that the interviews were going to be treated anonymously. Accompanying the sheet, a number of open questions were submitted with the aim of giving the interviewees time to reflect over and prepare whatever they considered were the most adequate and constructive answers. All our in-depth interviews were individual and they were carried out in a friendly and relaxed manner. They were recorded with mini-discs and later on transcribed. We were lucky to have small rooms at our disposal, so we were able to carry out the interviews without being disturbed.
4 RESULTS

In this chapter we summarise the results of the teachers’ answers according to the seven question areas described above.

4.1 LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

When it comes to supporting learners and making them develop their knowledge of the English language, the answers were relatively similar in both schools. We obtained very concrete suggestions about encouraging pupils’ abilities.

*Individualization* was a latent idea throughout all the interviews; however individualization as a concept was directly named by only two teachers. In the upper secondary school it was mentioned by means of encouragement and, even though all pupils worked with the same content, the tasks were adjusted to their needs.

I try to make them work with the same section in the book but they are able to work with different tasks, but then I think it’s as important to take care of those who are extremely advanced, give them extra assignments, as to adjust material to the weak ones. (Ana, 2005-11-17)

Another teacher explained that when she had a motivated class, she usually let pupils work in groups with whatever they considered to be the most useful for them. According to this teacher, it was more difficult to let pupils take such a responsibility with a less motivated class, therefore letting them work with the same material but at their own pace was a better alternative. She was positive about allowing students to decide which learning option they felt like using.

In secondary school, teachers gave us some pieces of advice of the sort “always have extra material to both poor learners and top achievers,” or, “when choosing material for them, you have to keep their language ability in mind and what grade they intend to achieve,” and “always keep their interest in the subject alive”.

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We also asked, within this domain, if pupils tend to divide themselves into groups according to their knowledge level. In secondary school most of the pupils work with a friend and prefer to decide by themselves the configuration of groups. They do not appreciate when the teacher does it for them. According to the teachers, the knowledge level does not seem to be important at this stage.

The teachers at upper secondary brought up a different pattern. Very proficient students preferred to work with friends at the same ability level. Motivated students, in particular, selected each other when it came to working in groups or with demanding tasks. However, these older pupils didn’t mind the teacher dividing them into groups. One tutor emphasized the benefit of placing students with different levels of readiness in the same group. It seemed as if less gifted pupils were more receptive to new knowledge when it came from a more advanced peer than from the teacher herself:

> Those who have reading and writing difficulties may get much help from more advanced ones. Many times they reach the weak ones better than I do since they think along the same lines. (Malin 2005-11-22)

### 4.2 SILENT AND/OR SHY STUDENTS

The aim of this domain was to investigate how teachers approach anonymous, silent and shy students. Teachers of both schools agreed that these students represent two problems: on the one hand it is difficult to encourage them to engage discussions or other kinds of verbal interaction. On the other hand it is not easy to assess their oral proficiency.

Teachers had to look for alternatives like listening extra carefully to those pupils while they express themselves in smaller groups. However, the really shy students, who under no circumstances could imagine themselves speaking in front of their peers, were able to have individual presentations with the teacher.
Another approach was to give them assignments in pairs since this was a good way of letting them communicate, and, for the teacher, a way of listening to them more exclusively. In order not to inhibit the students, it was also suggested to always ask them questions they are able to answer. Linus said that it doesn’t say in the curriculum that pupils have to do presentations in front of a whole class.

4.3 SLOW AND ADVANCED LEARNERS

As for what teachers do with regard to slow and advanced learners, in secondary school, they all thought that to support poor learners it was extremely important to vary instruction and maintain their interest and motivation. The model “learner autonomy” was adjusted for the advanced learners, because they are able to choose the pace they want to work at and select materials and tasks they consider more interesting. Teachers explained that another way to challenge their abilities, mostly for those students whose parents were English-speakers, was to let them attend English lessons in a higher class.

In upper secondary school, both Malin and Ana said that it was good for weak pupils to minimize the amount of tasks: “What’s important is not to do many tasks but to understand what you’re doing, it’s better if you do one that you understand than doing ten that you don’t.” Furthermore, to ease the burden for those who are lacking in academic ability, Ana said that working with pictures seemed to be beneficial.

The school also has something they call “studietorg” which is a sort of open area arranged to provide extra help to pupils who need to catch up or to those who want to obtain better grades. Teachers are divided in different teams and each team assumes a total of 15 hours of teaching-support. In other words, every teacher has to be available three hours a week. “The idea is to help pupils to either pass, if they are risking a fail, or to achieve better grades if they are interested in doing that” (Emilia, 2005-11-21).
To support advanced learners, Malin mentioned that pupils have the option of taking an exam in order to move on to the next level. Two of her pupils from English A were able to move on to English B after passing that exam. Other conventional methods to approach these students were to let them work with computers or with extra material of their own choice.

4.4 READING AND WRITING DIFFICULTIES

We also asked what the teachers and the school were able to do for those students who had reading and writing difficulties. In upper secondary school there was only one English special needs teacher and she was not able to help everyone because, according to Stefan, there are more than a hundred pupils who suffer from some kind of writing or reading disability. He told us that they had done a diagnostic test for those having serious difficulties. The maximum score was 33 points and the limit for failing was 11 points. 110 pupils did not pass the test. The alternative for these struggling learners is to turn to their “studietorg.” Malin mentioned that, unfortunately, the weak students do not use this opportunity efficiently because they do not feel motivated to attend their support sessions in their spare time.

The secondary school teachers described a resource team comprising two qualified special needs teachers and two teacher assistants. Other teachers are also involved in following pupils who have learning problems. They do not have workshops but get special resources to support weaker students.
4.5 ASSESSMENT

Since assessment is an essential part of teaching we brought up the question: how do you think assessment works in relation to the differences of readiness that exist in a class?

Linus said that in secondary school he assesses pupils following the structure or elements of the national test and that he measures their abilities continuously. When it comes to informing pupils about their grades, Karin pointed out that they are not supposed to get surprised when they see their results. Therefore, pupils are individually informed of their situation concerning their upcoming grades.

We also asked teachers if they gave some kind of “special counselling” to students who did not meet the criteria for pass. Maria answered “no, it’s the output itself that’s being assessed. Some of them can do backbreaking work but in the end it’s the final product itself that’s used.” Karin added: “in this school we seldom give a “sympathetic pass,” we don’t pass those who don’t meet the criteria because it would only be difficult for them in upper secondary school”.

In upper secondary school teachers answered that they too used continuous assessment. They also thought that it was a pity to be forced not to pass those students who had shown commitment: “It’s a sad situation because some work like dogs but are still ‘unmusical’ for English” (Stefan, 2005-11-19).

4.6 LEARNER AUTONOMY

Although learner autonomy was put into practice only in our secondary school, teachers at upper secondary also had insights on the matter. They thought that, to achieve success using this work form, pupils need to be independent, mature and disciplined. Emilia had once used learner autonomy but felt it necessary to leave it since students had a tendency to work on the same vocabulary all the time.
Linus, as mentioned before, works with learner autonomy in the secondary school. The school allows pupils in seventh grade to choose whether they want to work independently or more traditionally. The outcome was that advanced learners preferred learner autonomy. For Linus, in language autonomy “every group is an individual […] you only compete with yourself.”

4.7 STREAMING

In our last domain we were interested in knowing teachers’ thoughts about “streaming” (also called “tracking” in the USA) which is based on grouping students based on their ability level. The general attitudes towards streaming were positive in both schools but Stefan said that this system would not work for economic reasons. Interestingly enough, he said that, a couple of years ago streaming was looked upon as something hideous. According to Stefan streaming “was against everything that ‘equality prophets’ in Sweden argued about.” Moreover, he explained that streaming was used in upper secondary school when he started as a teacher. The English subject was then divided into ‘general’ (a course for everybody) and ‘particular’ (a course for advanced students).

At secondary school, Karin said that the eight graders were divided according to their level of ability. For instance, there is a big group that studies at a faster pace. This group is constantly in need of extra materials. They read novels, perform plays and do oral presentations. In other words, all students have the same book, but some groups have the potential and the opportunity to do extra work.

Pupils who have difficulties following the main group are gathered in a smaller group where the tasks and activities are explained more thoroughly. The lessons there are adapted to a slower pace.
5 DISCUSSION

As we have mentioned, we did not carry out our research to study what kind of strategies are the keys to answer the challenge of meeting all pupils’ needs in a mixed-ability classroom, but to get a closer understanding of teachers’ reflections and insights concerning that complex dilemma.

There were four main ideas that all teachers mentioned as means of meeting every pupil’s needs: to vary instruction, to have extra material, to individualize as much as possible and to assess continuously.

5.1 VARYING INSTRUCTION

At a certain point of the interview all teachers stressed the importance of varying instruction. They understood that giving students a varied set of activities was the only way to fit the different learning styles and to keep learners motivated.

Approaching content from different angles is the best way to avoid tedium and a decrease of attention. Lightbown and Spada agree: “Varying the activities, tasks, and materials can help to avoid this [boredom] and increase students’ interest levels” (p. 57). For Tomlinson “the teacher assumes that different learners have differing needs” (p. 4). Therefore he or she has to plan a variety of ways in an effort to come to meet all pupils’ needs.

In our opinion, it is quite obvious that teachers must vary instruction. We have too often seen pupils get bored and distracted as a consequence of the same monotonous routines.

Since English lessons have to take place within a communicative context, we believe that alternatives like discussions on authentic topics selected from the students’ own experiences and interests are rather successful in keeping a class motivated.
If students get to decide themselves the content concerning what they are going to talk about and if they have control over the course of the discussion, involvement and motivation are stimulated (Tornberg 2000, p.46)

By choosing authentic topics students recognize that English is a meaningful subject related to their everyday lives, and not just an irrelevant topic that belongs to the school.

5.2 EXTRA MATERIAL

This point was also named by all our interviewees. An inexperienced teacher might find himself/herself in the common dilemma of having some students finishing their tasks faster than others. To avoid that situation, our informants recommended us to always be prepared with extra material, mostly to keep the advanced students busy. However, Linus pointed out that “they don’t seem to appreciate it at all. We human beings are […] lazy”. Tomlinson (2001, p.11) describes a series of reasons why advanced learners may become bored due to lack of stimuli; concerning laziness she says:

Advanced learners can become mentally lazy, even though they do well in school. We have evidence (Clark, 1992; Ornstein & Thompson, 1984; Wittrock, 1977) that a brain loses capacity and “tone” without vigorous use, in much the same way that a little-used muscle does. If a student produces “success” without effort, potential brainpower can be lost.

Linus thinks that when fast finishers get extra materials they use to take it as some kind of punishment. In our opinion, to avoid this sense of punishment those extra materials should to a certain extent be amusing, but nonetheless challenging. Obviously, the extra materials have to be adjusted to the pupils’ current proficiency level. If tasks are beyond their reach, the effect can be frustrating and lead to a gradual loss of motivation.
5.2 INDIVIDUALIZATION

This was another point on which all teachers agreed, although they differed in the way it should be imparted. Some preferred to individualize instruction within the frame of larger groups. However, most of them thought that to really put into effect individualized teaching it was preferable to divide the class into smaller groups.

We mentioned that at upper secondary they have what they called “studietorg”: a way of giving individual support without disturbing the pace of the regular lessons. In our opinion, the problem with “studietorg” was that almost only the advanced learners got benefits from that individualized support. The less academically able students did not look at “studietorg,” as an option. The reason for that could be that teachers at “studietorg”, at least from what we interpreted from our conversations, were not really into communicative English. The supporting sessions were mostly about grammar. We think that an alternative could be to try to make “studietorg” an attractive option even for the weak students. Perhaps it could be a place where students were able to practice English as closer related subject, a sort of a meeting place where students could listen to music or discuss. Additionally, teachers could also present some kinds of pedagogic games that possibly would attract students to join these supporting sections even though they took place in their spare time.

At the secondary school, individualization was a reality for those pupils who had chosen learner autonomy. It was only within that context that students could plan, carry out, and evaluate their own tasks. These students sought feedback only when they needed it. Other students followed a more traditional structured learning pattern. Nevertheless, even these “traditional teachers” tried to meet every individual’s needs by helping pupils through the content and providing individual feedback. Tomlinson as well, comments on the benefits of giving particular or individual feedback, she means that “what is helpful for one student may not be for another” (Tomlinson 2001).
5.4 CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT

Without exception, all teachers commented on the importance of ongoing assessment. According to what our interviewees conveyed, we understand they put into practice what Douglas Brown calls *formative assessment*, that is, they do not only measure the final outcome, but evaluate “students in the process of ‘forming’ their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process.” (Brown 2004).

We support the idea of ongoing assessment, for us it is the only way teachers can keep up-to-date information about every pupil’s academic situation. That information can, and should, be used as guidelines to prepare individually directed lessons with the purpose of meeting everyone’s needs. Continuous assessment can help us to detect learner profiles and adjust instruction in order to, through variation, come to satisfy all learner styles. Needless to say, in order to give grades, a teacher cannot work only with processes. The instruction process has to result in a final or summative product that teachers have to evaluate.

We do not want to finish this section without bringing up the question of silent and/or shy students. On this topic our informants were unanimous. They all stressed the importance of being able to assess their communicative skills by placing them either in small groups or in pairs. Sometimes they just engaged individual dialogues with them. Even though silent students do not take an active part in communicative interaction they still acquire and process the information; yet, teachers have to find a way to assess their verbal abilities. We believe that there are actually no other ways to approach and assess silent students.
The aim of this dissertation was to investigate teachers’ thoughts on how to meet pupils’ needs in a mixed-ability classroom context. For students, the classroom represents not only a formal-learning arena, but also a decisive social place. However, for practical reasons, we decided to focus on pupils’ cognitive or academic needs rather than on their social ones.

We have described what a mixed-ability classroom is, and touched on some of the advantages and disadvantages of such a heterogeneous group. To succeed in meeting all pupils’ needs, teachers have to be aware of different learner factors, such as aptitude, motivation and attitude. Obviously, teachers should not forget that pupils have different learning styles to acquire and process information. Since all children have singular intellectual aptitudes to attain knowledge, perhaps bearing in mind Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, can influence teachers’ chances of planning meaningful tasks and lessons, and increase the possibility of meeting students’ different cognitive needs.

The literature we consulted showed a variety of approaches that deal with teaching mixed-ability groups; we have tried to bring up what we thought were relevant strategies by means of using concepts like differentiation and individualization, and working forms like learner autonomy.

We chose a qualitative research approach. It gave us the opportunity to study in detail and in context the answers we obtained from interviewing seven English teachers at secondary and upper secondary level. We carried out the interviews individually and in-depth. They gave us a number of findings we have analyzed and came up with the results we have presented and discussed. We have to admit that we had expected deeper and, perhaps, more original outcomes. So, to a certain extend, we feel a bit disappointed.

Therefore, given that there is no “magic answer,” we have come to the conclusion that a combination of strategies has to be put into practice if we as teachers want to succeed in creating a classroom environment where all pupils have the chance to develop and achieve success in their learning.
REFERENCES


Lightbown, Patsy & Spada, Nina, 2002 *How Languages are Learned*, USA: Oxford University Press


ATTACHMENT

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

• I varje klass finns det elever som representerar olika förväntningar, olika synsätt och olika förmågor. Vad gör du för att stödja alla dessa olika elevers språkutveckling?

• I vilken utsträckning förekommer det att olika elever har olika uppgifter?

• Arbetar dina elever med olika material?

• Arbetar de tillsammans med elever som befinner sig på samma kunskapsnivå?

• Vad anser du om nivågruppering?

• Vad gör du med de tysta, anonyma eller blyga, de som är ovilliga att använda språket? Hur gör du för att lyfta fram dem?

• Vad gör du med de verkligt duftiga eleverna så att de utmanas i sin förmåga?

• Hur kan du ge stöd åt elever med läs- och skrivsvårigheter?

• Finns det specialpedagoger på skolan?

• Finns det någon sorts språkverkstad i skolan?

• Vilka bedömningsmetoder använder du?

• Hur tycker du att bedömningsmetoderna fungerar i förhållande till de stora kunskapsskillnader som ofta finns i en klass?

• Vad anser du om learner autonomy?

• Hur gör du med de som har det lite svårare med engelska?