Adolescents’ Perceptions of English Outside of School
A Study of Four Young People’s Thoughts on English in Their Spare Time

Ungdomars uppfattningar om engelska utanför skolan
En studie av fyra ungdomars tankar om engelska på fritiden

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Abstract

This study investigates adolescents’ perceptions and thoughts on English outside of school. Adolescents come in contact with English everywhere these days and English has become more of a second language than a foreign language in today’s society. The purpose of this study is to get a deeper understanding of what young people think about the English they meet in their spare time. Four young people who are all ninth-graders were interviewed for the study. They were asked questions about where they meet English in their spare time, how they use the language and how they learn English outside of school. Their responses show that adolescents come in contact with English through different sources, they use the language according to their interests and they all go about learning English in different ways.

Keywords: adolescents, English, outside of school, spare time
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Introduction

During my teacher practice I have experienced that pupils come to the classroom with knowledge about English that they have gained in their spare time, primarily from different media. It seems clear that adolescents do not only learn English in school but in their spare time as well. When I start working as an English teacher, I want to bring the English that adolescents meet outside of school into the classroom. Therefore it is very interesting for me as a future teacher to gain an understanding of how adolescents come in contact with English, how they use the language and how they learn it outside of school in order to take advantage of it in my teaching. That is why I have decided to investigate adolescents’ perceptions and thoughts on English in their spare in my study.

This study is based on interviews with four adolescents in Scania. Their responses in the interviews have helped me to gain a deeper understanding of what thoughts and perceptions adolescents have of English outside of school.

Background

English has become more of a second language than a foreign language in Sweden today. Adolescents do not only meet the language in school but are exposed to it everywhere. Young people come into contact with English on TV and films, in music, on the Internet, in TV and computer games and through English-speaking people.

Furthermore, it is stated in the syllabus for English in compulsory school that teachers should take advantage of the English young people meet outside of school. The school subject English should provide a background and a perspective, to the English pupils meet in their surroundings. In the syllabus for English in compulsory school it says: “The subject of English provides both a background to and a wider perspective on the cultural and social expressions surrounding pupils in today’s international society. The subject covers both examining the meaning conveyed by language and making use of the richness and variety of English, which children and young people meet outside of school” (2000). Hence it is important for teachers to know about adolescents’ thoughts and perceptions of the English they meet in their spare time.
In this study the perceptions and thoughts adolescents’ have on English outside of school will be presented and analysed. The learning of English that is presented and analysed is the adolescents’ perceptions of how they learn English. The learning of English in an institutionalised context, such as in school is not dealt with. In other words it is merely how the adolescents in the study perceive their own learning that is being dealt with and not an investigation of how adolescents learn English.

**Purpose and questions**

The purpose of this study is to investigate adolescents’ perceptions of English outside of school. Specifically, I want to know what thoughts four adolescents in secondary school have about English in their spare time. Questions that I want to look into are: Where do adolescents come in contact with English during their spare time? How do they use English in their spare time? and How do adolescents learn English outside of school?
Literature review

The objective of this dissertation is to gain a deeper understanding of adolescents’ perceptions and thoughts on English outside of school. Some reports from the Swedish National Agency for Education deal with this particular topic. In Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003 (Skolverket, 2004) and Engelska i åtta europeiska länder – en undersökning av ungdomars kunskaper och uppfattningar (Skolverket, 2004), a selection of pupils were questioned regarding their attitudes and perceptions of English both in and outside of school. These reports are of use for my study since I want to know what adolescents think about English outside of school. Moreover, the syllabus for English in compulsory school can also be applied to the topic.

Initially it is worth mentioning that English has an influential position in Sweden today (Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan 2003, further on referred to as NU-03). Adolescents have wide access to the language in Swedish society and NU-03: Ämnesrapport engelska (Skolverket, 2005) claims that adolescents more than ever are surrounded by English through popular culture and different media. Young people meet English in a variety of contexts outside of school. They meet English on TV, in films and music, in TV and computer games, via the Internet and through English-speaking people. Adolescents do not only come in contact with the language, they also engage in activities in English, such as chatting on the Internet, during their spare time. According to the report Engelska i åtta europeiska länder – en undersökning av ungdomars kunskaper och uppfattningar, Swedish adolescents watch English TV or films on video and cinema very often. They listen very much to music with English lyrics and they play computer games and use the Internet several hours per week. In NU-03, 70% of the young people in the survey say that they read or communicate via the Internet and one third chat in English.

Adolescents also read books in English occasionally. Books, such as Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings have become very popular. Young people want to read these in English rather than in translated versions (NU-03: Ämnesrapport engelska). Half of the adolescents in the study in NU-03 claim that they play games where they use English. It is not clear whether it is computer and TV games or board games that are being mentioned by the young people. Through travels abroad they also come in contact with English. This is a reminder of English functioning as a lingua franca, not least
between young people. This is also mentioned by Oscarson & Apelgren in *Tankar kring grundskolans utveckling: Ämnet Engelska* (Skolverket, 2005). The authors say that English has a strong and evident position as a world language and in many ways it functions as a lingua franca. It is also worth mentioning that adolescents today actively use English outside of school to a greater extent compared to only one or two decades ago (*NU-03: Ämnesrapport engelska*).

English has become more of a second language than a foreign language in Sweden today. According to Oscarson & Apelgren adolescents today do not any longer experience English as a foreign language but see it as a natural part of the society in which we live. This is because of the influential position English has in Sweden since, “the language and other forms of culture from English-speaking countries are widely accessible in Swedish society” (*Syllabus for English in compulsory school*, 2000).

Since adolescents constantly are exposed to English they acquire the language in more ways than just from school which could be the case with foreign languages such as French, German or Spanish. Many adolescents do not longer want to study foreign languages and this could be because they do not see a need to know these languages outside of school (Oscarson & Apelgren). English, on the other hand is a very important language for young people since they are surrounded by it in everyday life. According to *NU-03: Ämnesrapport engelska*, young people value their knowledge of English as important both in and outside of school. In comparison to young people in Spain and France, Swedish adolescents seem to be surrounded by a lot more English. This is most obvious when it comes to contact with the language via TV and films. Young people in Sweden express that it is important to know English in order to understand TV programmes without subtitles, whereas adolescents in other countries mention other factors. This probably has to do with the fact that TV programmes and films are dubbed in Spain and France and not in Sweden (*Engelska i åtta europeiska länder*). Furthermore, in *NU-03*, it is stated that Swedish adolescents express that English is important for future studies and employment. Many young people also say that it is good to know English so that they can communicate with other people.

Both *NU-03* and *Engelska i åtta europeiska länder* mention that Swedish adolescents have a very positive attitude towards English, both as a language and a subject in school. *Engelska i åtta europeiska länder* states that 96% of the adolescents participating in the study, like English as a language and 92% like the language as a subject in school. The majority of the adolescents even like the language and subject
very much. These numbers place Swedish adolescents highest among the participating countries in the study when it comes to pupils’ interest in English. In NU-03, 86% of the adolescents say that English is interesting. In comparison to the subjects Swedish and Mathematics, English is the most popular subject among the young people (NU-03: Ämnesrapport engelska). One interpretation of this is that young people feel the need to learn English because they are surrounded by it in their spare time. Of course they are also surrounded by Swedish but most adolescents already know Swedish well. In contrast many young people believe that English is exciting since it is a world language. Through the language they have the possibility to communicate with people from all over the world. (NU-03: Ämnesrapport engelska).

The NU-03 report also reveals that many young people feel that English is the subject where they learn the most and where they feel the most desire for learning. Adolescents feel it is important to have a good knowledge of English in order to understand and make themselves understood in contact with other people both internationally and locally. Not only is it important for them to know English in contact with other people but it is also important in their understanding of what they read and hear. Of the adolescents in the survey in Engelska i åtta europeiska länder, 98% state that it is very or rather important to know English, and as many as 75% claim that it is very important. Few adolescents question the value of learning English. It is natural for them to learn the language. The positive attitude surely has to do with the status and dominant position of the language.

Adolescents also have big confidence in understanding and using the language. According to Engelska i åtta europeiska länder, 90% of the pupils in the survey estimate that they easily understand instructions, questions or requests in everyday English. Furthermore, young people feel very confident about understanding spoken English through media. In NU-03, the adolescents in the survey state that they manage very well in communicating with English-speaking people. They also manage well in reading fiction and non-fiction as well as listening to and understanding English in lyrics, on TV and film. The fact that Swedish adolescents are surrounded by English is positive for their opportunities to learn in informal ways. Possibly, this contributes to their good confidence in their own knowledge. Adolescents do not only want to but they also dare to use English both in and outside of school. According to NU-03, pupils reach several of the “goals to aim for” in the syllabus for English because they dare to use English in and outside of school. Thus, one can say that the English outside of school
plays a part in pupils’ grades in school. It must be looked upon as positive that adolescents dare to and want to use English in communicative situations outside of school (NU-03: Ämnesrapport engelska). Adolescents engage in many activities in English during their spare time. The pupils’ answers in a survey in NU-03 show that many chat and read texts on the Internet, listen to English lyrics, listen to English on TV and radio, play computer games and much more. Engelska i åtta europeiska länder, states that in comparison to young people in Europe, Swedish adolescents talk a lot English with friends or family members. Furthermore, they use the Internet very often and occasionally read books. But they read few English magazines and do not play English computer games very often.

However, the report NU-03 also shows that there is a clear difference in how pupils who have grades in English use the language outside of school compared to pupils who do not have grades in English. Pupils without grades engage a lot less, than pupils with grades, in activities where English is of use in their spare time. As an example the pupils without grades chat a lot less in English and they do not listen to as much music with English lyrics as pupils with grades. They also estimate that they do not manage well in practical situations where English is needed. Differences are clearest when it comes to activities where reading is involved (NU-03: Ämnesrapport engelska). The report also shows that weaker pupils give school a lot more credit for their knowledge of English than stronger pupils with high grades. The latter mentioned pupils claim that they have gained at least as much or even more knowledge of English outside of school, whereas the pupils with lower grades say that they learn most of their English in school. It seems to be the case that the better a pupil is in English, the more he or she learns outside of school. However, the pupils also say that school has had the most important role in their knowledge of English. This is also stated in Engelska i åtta europeiska länder. On average adolescents give school the credit for 55% of their knowledge of English, whereas they feel that they have gained around 30% of their knowledge from different media and 14% in other ways. But the survey also show that pupils with good results think that they have not learned as much in school as outside of school whereas weaker students give the school more credit than the average 55% of their knowledge.

In the syllabus for English in compulsory school one of the goals to aim for, is for pupils to: “develop their ability to reflect over and take responsibility for their own language learning and consciously use different ways of working to support their own learning”. This means that pupils should not just want to learn English in school, but
they should also try to engage in learning in their spare time with the help of different media. Additionally one of the goals that pupils should have attained by the end of the ninth school year is to: “be able to reflect over and draw conclusions about their way of learning English” (Syllabus for English in compulsory school, 2000).

In order to analyse the informants’ responses in my study I will use the reports presented to make comparisons and to see if the adolescents in this study are like other Swedish young people regarding this topic. Obviously no generalisations can be made based on only four informants but still some comparisons can be drawn between the informants’ thoughts and perceptions and the findings in the research literature.
Research methodology

My research is based on qualitative interviews with four adolescents. I have chosen qualitative interviewing because such a method can provide information which makes it possible to understand the informants’ thoughts and perceptions (Johansson & Svedner, 2001). Since I want to get an in-depth perception of the adolescents’ thoughts I believe that qualitative interviewing is the ideal method for my research. This method also gives me the possibility to ask follow-up questions in connection with the informants’ responses and consequently, I can aim for the in-depth perceptions required in a study such as this one. As Amos Hatch states in Doing Qualitative Research in Education Settings “the strength of interviews is that they allow insight into participant perspectives” (Hatch, 2002, p. 97).

According to Hatch, a qualitative interview is a kind of formal interview which is semistructured. This means that the questions asked are intended to be guiding questions and that the interviewer can ask follow-up questions according to the informants’ responses. The interviewer should expect the interview to go in the direction where the informant takes it. Furthermore, the interviewer should plan to ask follow-up questions (Hatch). Obviously this means that the questions asked could vary from one interview to another depending on the informants’ responses. Therefore, the questions must be adjusted to each informant so that he or she gets the opportunity to bring up everything that he or she wants to say (Johansson & Svedner).

Sampling

Four adolescents were chosen as interviewees: two girls from my partner school and two boys among my acquaintances. The criterion for choosing the participants was that they should be ninth-graders because younger adolescents might not have the same kind of insights into this particular topic. It did not matter whether the participants were strong or average pupils but weaker pupils were left out of the option. The reason why weaker pupils were left out of the option was that they as well as younger adolescents might not have the same insight as stronger pupils. The research literature also shows that weaker pupils do not engage as much in activities where English is involved during
their spare time (NU-03). Because of the time constraint and the convenience the interviewees should also be easy to access. Since I want to go for an in-depth approach in my essay I believe that four interviews are enough to get the material that I want.

**Data collection**

It is always a challenge to come up with interview questions which will provide in-depth answers. Therefore it is important that the questions are open-ended ones that prevent the interviewees from answering with a simple yes or no. The aim with my questions was that they all should be open-ended. Some of the guiding questions for the interview were inspired by the research literature. These questions were developed and more were added. I ended up with twelve guiding questions for the interviews. The questions concern how adolescents come in contact with English, how and where they use the language in their spare time and how they learn English outside of school. The questions were used as a base during the interviews and they were followed by other questions depending on the participants’ answers. My questions are found in the appendix.

**Procedure**

Initially I contacted my tutor at my partner school and asked her to ask four pupils to participate in my study. Of the pupils in her English class, four volunteered to be interviewed. Unfortunately none of the original four pupils at my partner school could participate during the day when I was there. Therefore I had to ask two girls from another class if they wanted to participate as informants in this study. I know these two girls since my teacher practice time. Because of the time constraint I after a while decided to choose two of the pupils from my partner school and ask two of my acquaintances to participate.

All of the interviews were carried out individually and were recorded on tape. This allowed me to focus on the interviews instead of taking notes. Before I started the interviews I provided the interviewees with information about my study and assured
them of their anonymity. After having started the tape recorder I first asked them to tell me a little about themselves in order to encourage them to talk.

The first two interviews with the girls were carried out in a small room at my partner school during school time. Their French teacher allowed me to take them from their lesson. The other two interviews were carried out during the following day in my parents’ kitchen. These two interviews were held in the afternoon after school.

Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes, although the girls talked a bit more than the boys. This proved to be enough time to collect the information relevant for my study. I did not want to go on longer because it would perhaps have been tiresome for the informants. Swedish was the language used in all the interviews since it is the language both the adolescents and I use in everyday life.

Although I had a set of questions that I wanted to ask all informants, I did not let the interview be controlled by the discourse of my questions. The informants’ responses allowed me to ask the questions in different order and also to ask follow-up questions. According to Hatch the interviewer should take the interview in the direction where the informant wants to go. This is what I did during the interviews with my informants.

**Ethics**

Naturally I will leave out any information about the informants’ names or where they attend school. But I need to give some background information that could be of relevance to my analysis. In spite of this it will not be possible to recognise the informants’ identities. According to Johansson & Svedner it is of great importance that the anonymity of the informants is protected. There should be no possibility of identifying the school or the pupils. Therefore, I will use assumed names of the participants in my essay. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the informants have been notified that their anonymity will be protected and they have been given clear information of the purpose of the interviews and my study.

Quotes used in the results section have been translated by me and therefore they might not reflect the true nature of the adolescents’ way of talking.
Results and analysis

This section presents the results of my data collection. It begins with a presentation of the interviewees followed by the results. The results are divided into three topic-oriented categories rather than presenting each informant’s responses separately. The reason for doing so is that the categories connect to the research questions. In addition the informants have rather similar views on the different areas in this investigation. Therefore it would have been repetitive to present the adolescents one after another. Each presented category is followed by an analysis of the informants’ responses.

Presentation of the interviewees

Four informants were chosen to be interviewed for the study. The informants are two girls and two boys, who are all ninth-graders. The names of the informants are assumed names to assure their anonymity.

Emma is 16 years old and she attends a secondary school in a big city in southern Scania. She lives in an apartment with both her parents in the same city where she attends school. She has applied for the Drama Programme at upper secondary school. She is a strong achieving pupil in English. She believes that her knowledge of English is enough to manage in and outside of school.

Sara is Emma’s friend and they attend the same school. She also lives in the same city where she attends school, in an apartment with her father. She is 17 years old and she comes from a country in north western Africa. When she came to Sweden she first had to study Swedish for a year before starting school and that is why she is one year older than her classmates. Her mother tongue is French. She too has applied for the Drama Programme at upper secondary school. Sara has dyslexia and she is an average achieving pupil in English. Regarding her knowledge of English she says that she thinks she has good knowledge but every day there is always something new to learn - she believes that she can always learn more than she already knows.

Martin is 15 years old and he lives in a smaller city in southern Scania. He goes to a secondary school in the same city in which he lives. He lives with his mother in a terrace house. He has applied for the Construction Programme at upper secondary
school. Martin is an average achieving pupil in English. He believes that he has enough knowledge to get by but it could have been better.

Daniel lives in a house with both his parents not very far from Martin who is his friend. They go to the same school. Daniel has applied for the Natural Science Programme at upper secondary school. He is a strong achieving pupil in English and he believes that he has good knowledge of the language.

All of the above mentioned adolescents have access to TV, DVD, and the Internet at home.

Adolescents’ contact with English in their spare time

The adolescents participating in this study meet English in different contexts outside of school every day. One of the first sources that all of the informants mention is television. In addition to TV, film also provides the adolescents with English outside of school. The Internet is yet another source where the boys and girls come in contact with English. One of the boys, Daniel, also mentions TV games as one of the contexts where he meets English. Furthermore, one of the girls, Sara, plays computer and TV games and comes into contact with English there. But this is not an activity that Emma or Martin engage very much in and therefore they have no or little experience of English in connection with those kinds of games. Another contact with English is offered through music. All of the informants listen to English music.

Three of the adolescents also say that they come in contact with English through people. Martin plays handball and in his club the first team plays in the premier league. There are some foreign players in the first team who do not speak Swedish well, and therefore Martin speaks English with them. “I talk English with the big guys in the first team”, Martin says. Sara mentions that she hears a lot of people speaking English in town: “[…] and then there are people too in town who talk a lot and who use English a lot”. Sometimes she has met people who ask her for directions in English. Emma talks English with her South-American neighbour. Sometimes she is babysitting the neighbours’ children.

Both the girls and Daniel have been abroad on one or several occasions and they have then come in contact with English. Emma says that she has been to London and
France and other places where she has met English. Sara has been back to her country of birth where they speak both French and English. Spain is the country where Daniel has been on vacation once and there he came into contact with English.

Another contact with English is through books and magazines. Because of her dyslexia, Sara listens to rather than reads books in English. Emma tries to read books but she feels it is hard to find the time, instead she reads magazines. “I just read these kinds of Elle-magazines in English”, she says. None of the boys mention anything about reading English in their spare time.

**Analysis of adolescents’ contact with English in their spare time**

So, where do adolescents come into contact with English in their spare time? Well, as we have seen, the young people in the study do so in numerous contexts. This is also something which is reflected in the research literature. The adolescents in this study meet English on TV, in films and music, on the Internet, in TV- and computer-games, in books and magazines and through English-speaking people. All of these contexts are also mentioned in both *NU-03* and *Engelska i åtta europeiska länder*. Therefore it could be said that Emma, Sara, Martin and Daniel come in contact with English through the same sources as other Swedish young people. Adolescents listen a lot to music with English lyrics according to *Engelska i åtta europeiska länder*. The girls and boys in this study all listen to music but none of them have expressed how much. With this in regard it is hard to make an assumption about the amount of time they spend listening to music and therefore how much English they meet through this source. But in society today we are constantly exposed to music on radio, in shops and elsewhere. Therefore one can probably say that adolescents listen to some kind of English music every day.

Television is, together with music, mentioned by all of the informants as a source where they come in contact with English. This is not in any way remarkable since we all meet English on TV every day. Most of the programmes on TV today are probably in English.

As many as 70% come into contact with English through the Internet, according to *NU-03*. In this study all of the informants mention Internet as a source of English. Daniel and Emma also chat frequently in English on the Internet. This corresponds with
the *NU-03* report, which claims that one third of the adolescents who use the Internet also chat in English.

Another way of coming into contact with the language is through English-speaking people. Three of the adolescents in this study come into contact with English in that way. Since Sweden is a multi cultural society it is quite common to use English as the language of communication.

The results in this category also show that the girls come into contact with English through books and magazines. Since the boys do not mention this, they probably never or seldom read books, papers or magazines in English.

In conclusion it is obvious that the adolescents come into contact with English through a vast variety of sources.

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**Adolescents’ use of English in their spare time**

The young people in this study talk about how they use English outside of school almost every day. Obviously they all use English when they watch TV since they hear English-speaking people every day on TV and films.

Martin, Daniel and Emma chat on the Internet with other adolescents. Daniel and Emma are the ones who chat most frequently and they both communicate in English with chat-friends from other countries. The person who Emma chats the most with is from Australia. “We chat about music and how we are doing in school”, she says. Daniel’s friend comes from Spain. “I have a foreign friend with whom I speak English”, Daniel says. Martin does not chat very often on the Internet but he has a Swedish friend who has moved to the U.S.A. Sometimes when they chat Martin’s friend uses English instead of Swedish as the communicative language. Sara, on the other hand, does not enjoy chatting in English on the Internet. She has tried chatting but since she did not know much English at the time, she had trouble making herself understood. She says, “I didn’t know a lot of English then and they didn’t get what I said”. Because of this she felt embarrassed and has not chatted in English since then: “It was too embarrassing when they wrote ‘what?’’. It is much better when you talk to people”. Although she does not use the Internet for chatting she uses it to search for words when she is doing her homework.
The boys and girls also use English when they talk to people. As mentioned before, Martin talks with the foreign players in the first team in his club. Emma talks English with her neighbour when she is babysitting for her children. Sara sometimes talks English when someone asks her for directions. “If someone comes up and says: Excuse me can you […] then you must talk and the words just come out of your mouth”, Sara says. Additionally she sometimes talks English with her father because he enjoys speaking the language. Three of the young people have also used English when they have been abroad. When Daniel was in Spain last year he used English when the Spanish he knows was not enough to make himself understood. “I used English when I ordered in restaurants”, he says. In her country of birth, Sara talked English because her relatives wanted to test her and see if she knew the language. Even though it is a French speaking country, Sara says that most of the people speak and understand English better than French. Emma says that she has used English when she was in London and France but not very much. “Mostly it was my parents who talked”, she says. Two of the informants say that they sometimes talk English with their friends because it is fun or because they cannot find words in Swedish. Sara says, “Lately we have been speaking English with each other. It is fun so we talk now and then and if I can’t think of a word in Swedish I say it in English. It is pretty fun”.

Sara uses English when she listens to books on tape which she borrows from the library. She finds it very useful to listen to books because she can listen to them over and over again in order to understand and get the context. “It is also good to hear people speaking English”, Sara says. In fact she recommends everybody, not only people with dyslexia, to listen to taped books. Sara also mentions that when she buys products she reads the instruction manual in English. Even if instructions are provided in Swedish she reads them in both languages. Emma does not find the time to read books in English but instead she reads fashion magazines.

Playing TV games is an activity where Daniel and Sara use their English. Sara says that the instructions mostly are in English. This is also something which Daniel mentions. He talks about the directions being in English.
Analysis of adolescents’ use of English in their spare time

The adolescents in this study spend a lot of their spare time using English. This is obviously because of TV. But they also use English more consciously, for example when they are chatting on the Internet. As mentioned above, both Emma and Daniel have chat-friends from different countries. From their responses one can suppose that they talk to them quite often. According to Engelska i åtta europeiska länder, adolescents use the Internet several hours per week and this seem to be the case with Emma and Daniel.

Half of the adolescents in this study play TV games and this is in line with NU-03 in which half of the young people are reported to play games where they use their English. Naturally, no generalisations can be made from only four adolescents but nevertheless there are interesting correlations with the information in the research reports.

As we have seen in NU-03 and Engelska i åtta europeiska länder, weaker pupils do not engage as much as stronger pupils in activities where English is involved during their spare time. This also seems to be the case in this study. Martin is the one who has the lowest grade in English among the adolescents and he is also the one who engages in least activities outside of school where English is involved.

It could be said that the adolescents use English in different situations depending on their interests. Emma and Daniel both enjoy chatting on the Internet so they engage actively in that. Martin’s interest is handball and it is when he practices it that he sometimes uses English. Otherwise he does not seem to have much interest in engaging in activities in English during his spare time. Sara enjoys listening to English and that is why she uses the language when she listens to taped books. Obviously they all use English when they watch TV but it is more in an unconscious way. All of them also use the language on the Internet in some way or another and in different extents.

Adolescents’ learning of English outside of school

The young participants feel that they learn a lot of English outside of school but perhaps not more than in school. Emma is the only one who believes that she has learned more English outside of school than in school. Sara says that she has gained her knowledge mostly from school but she started to learn English outside of school. Before she started
to study English in school she heard the language on TV and thus gained some knowledge. Films and music has helped Daniel to gain knowledge in English but he has learned the most in school. Martin says that he has gained most of his knowledge from school.

Music is the source where some of the adolescents feel that they learn English. Daniel searches for lyrics on the Internet and looks up words he does not understand in a dictionary. However, sometimes he can figure out what the words mean from the context. Emma says that she learns not only ordinary phrases from music but unusual words and phrases as well. She too reads the lyrics but she finds them in the text booklet which you get with the CD. “I have really learned a lot from that”, she says. Martin listens to music a lot, but he rarely searches for lyrics or look up words he does not understand. “It happens if I have the time and energy to do it but not otherwise”, he says.

They all say that they learn English from TV. Martin says that he learns through the subtitles. If the people on TV say something which he does not understand, he can read it in Swedish in the subtitles. In this way he learns some new words each week. Emma points to the fact that we do not dub films or TV programmes in Sweden. She believes that because of this she learns English even though she is not aware of that she does. Every day she learns something new from TV or film. However, she says that she learned more when she was younger. “I learned more when I was little. Now I don’t really think about it. But some way you learn. Yeah, like every day”, Emma says. Sara too learns something new from TV every day. She listens very carefully when she watches TV and if it is a programme she likes she listens to every word they say. Daniel feels that he learns new words every time he watches TV. If there is a word he does not understand he reads the subtitles. If the subtitles are missing he does not have problems understanding. “I understand anything anyway”, he says. Emma does not notice if the subtitles are missing. “I don’t think about if the subtitles are there or not. Even if I read the subtitles I would have understood anyway if they where not there”, she says. Sara has films which she rewinds and listens to if she does not understand. Martin does not understand easily when there are no subtitles. He says that he can understand some things, but he does not understand everything.

On the question of how the adolescents can use the English they learn in their spare time in school, they all answer differently. “When you are chatting you can see how they (people) are writing […] Instead of just learning grammar you learn how to feel to
write. A feeling for writing”, Emma says. She claims that she can use this feeling for writing in school. Sara listens to how people talk in her spare time and says that she can use this in school. She explains that she cannot develop her talking into writing but she still has usage for it. She says, “I can’t put it down on paper, you know write it down, but still I can use it” Words which she learns outside of school are also of use in school. Martin does not think that he can use the English he learns in his spare time very much in school. He says, “Perhaps I can use some words I have learned from TV”. Daniel thinks that, because of the English he learns in his spare time, it is probably easier for him to understand texts in school and follow along when the teacher talks. “Well, it’s easier when you read texts and run through stuff, then perhaps you can understand more. And, yes in word tests maybe you know some words since before”, he says.

In contrast, they all say that the English they learn in school is useful during their spare time. Martin says that it is the English he learns in school that he uses in his spare time. Instructions and directions which Daniel has learned in school are of use to him when he plays TV games. He says, “In TV games I understand the directions immediately if I have learned them in school”. Emma says that she has even more use for the English she learns in school than the other way around but still she believes that she has learned most of her English outside of school. Sara says that she actually has much use of the school-English in her spare time.

**Analysis of adolescents’ learning of English outside of school**

The adolescents all say that they learn English from TV in one or another way. This is what they have in common in how they go about learning English. Most of them mention that they learn through the subtitles. Some of them even look up words that they hear and do not understand. But this is when they have the time and energy to do it.

When adolescents use or come in contact with English outside of school they learn in informal ways. It could be said that they learn even though they are not aware of it. This is something that Emma mentions in the interview. She thinks she learns from TV even though she is not aware of that she does. Young people constantly hear spoken English on TV and pick up a few words here and a few words there and unconsciously remember them. But obviously, they are also aware of their learning sometimes. Daniel
sometimes looks up words he does not understand in for example lyrics. He certainly
does this because of his own interest and because he wants to understand the music he
listens to.

Not much is said in the research reports about how adolescents go about learning
English in their spare time. But a lot is written about where young people gain their
knowledge of English from. School is given the most credit for young people’s
knowledge of English but many claim that they have learned a lot outside of school as
well according to Engelska i åtta europeiska länder. This is also reflected among the
informants in this study. Three of them claim that they have gained the most of their
knowledge of English from school. Emma is the only one who believes that she has
learned the most outside of school but she is also the one who has the highest grade
among the informants. This correlates with what is stated in both of the surveys in NU-
03 and Engelska i åtta europeiska länder. Stronger achieving adolescents with higher
grades give school less credit for their knowledge of English. But still Emma says that
she has even more use of the English she has learned in school than the other way
around. This can also be compared to NU-03 in which adolescents say that school has
played the most important role in their knowledge of English.

Adolescents in NU-03 and Engelska i åtta europeiska länder do not have trouble
understanding spoken English through media and neither do the young people in this
study. Martin is the only one who expresses that it is not easy to understand when the
subtitles are missing on TV. The other informants understand easily even if the subtitles
are missing. One frequent comment is that they “understand anyway” even if the
subtitles are missing on TV. It certainly has to do with the fact that we in Sweden do not
dub TV-programmes or films that adolescents “understand anyway”.

The answer to the research question of how adolescents learn English outside of
school is that they all learn the language in different ways. They somehow seem to be
quite aware of their learning in their spare time. The fact that they consciously find
lyrics and look up words they do not understand in both music and on TV, show that
they want to learn English even outside of school.

As we have seen in all of the categories above, a personal voice from the adolescents
have been presented. Such thoughts and perceptions as these adolescents have are
important to hear of in contrast to answers on surveys. Therefore, this is an important
study since it is based on interviews where the adolescents are allowed to speak their
minds.
Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to get an in-depth understanding of adolescents’ perceptions and thoughts of English in their spare time. In this final part of my dissertation I discuss the findings of my study.

Since I have only interviewed four informants for this study it is not my aim to make any generalisations. Still, some conclusions can be made from the findings of the interviews.

Discussion

Findings from my research show that the adolescents in this study have many thoughts about English outside of school. They all have different ways of using and learning English in their spare time. But still they are somewhat alike in many areas.

To be able to reach an in-depth understanding of the adolescents’ perceptions and thoughts, interviewing was the best method to use. However, in retrospect, it is clear that my interviews have given rise to new questions. Since I have done the research on my own, it was difficult to focus on both listening to the interviewees’ answers as well as thinking of follow-up questions. I believe that this would have been easier being two interviewers. On the other hand, it might feel more relaxing for the interviewees with only one person doing the interviews.

There were no surprises in the adolescents’ answers of where they meet English in their spare-time. Since we are all surrounded by English every day we all know were we can meet the language. However, one of the girls mentioned taped books as a source where she meets English and this was news to me. I did not know that taped books could be found in English at the library. Therefore it was interesting for me to hear about how she uses these books. The boys’ and girls’ answers of where they meet English also corresponded with the research literature where the same sources of English are mentioned.

The most obvious source of English is of course television which also was mentioned by all of the informants. The fact that TV programmes and films are not dubbed in Sweden was expected to be mentioned by the interviewees. The surprise was that only
one informant talked about dubbing. But it seems like it is common among young people that they understand even if the subtitles are missing. It is becoming more and more common that English is not being translated in certain segments on TV, in for example commercials and some sport and entertainment programmes according to Oscarson & Apelgren. This is probably where we are heading. Perhaps in one or two decades many programmes on TV will no longer be translated because people understand anyway.

The young people all use English on the Internet in some way and this was in no way unexpected since the Internet is a part of everyone’s life these days. The fact that three of the adolescents speak the language quite often, as it seems, was unexpected. Not only are they speaking the language with English-speaking people but also with each other because they think it is fun. Perhaps the reason why adolescents are talking English with each other is that they think it is an exciting language and they find it enjoyable to speak it.

The fact that the adolescents seem to be quite aware of their learning in their spare time is in some way surprising. But it seems like they are learning for themselves and not in order to use the language in school. When I asked the question about how they can use the English they meet in their spare time in school it took a while for them to think of something. When I told Sara about my study and asked her if she wanted to do the interview she immediately said yes. She did this because, according to her, she knows exactly how she goes about learning English in her spare time and she wanted to share it with me. Adolescents want to learn English because it is a world language which the majority know and can use. Adolescents want to be a part of the English-speaking world. Thus, English is a subject with many advantages. According to Oscarson & Apelgren pupils can see that they are learning when they constantly come in contact with the language outside of school. It is a subject which connects to the pupils’ private life.

Oscarson & Apelgren argue that it is becoming more and more important to acknowledge pupils’ experiences of English outside of school. Therefore, this topic is relevant both for teachers and future teachers. Teachers need to be aware of the fact that pupils are learning outside of school as well as in school and take advantage of the English adolescents meet outside of school. Furthermore, it is actually a part of the syllabus for English in compulsory school (2000) to take advantage of the rich and varying selection of English that children and adolescents meet outside of school. The
school subject English should provide a background and a perspective, to the English pupils meet in their surroundings.

It can be difficult as a teacher to take advantage of all the English adolescents meet outside of school. According to Engelska i åtta europeiska länder, teachers encourage their pupils to talk English in the classroom. However, it is unusual that the teachers encourage the pupils to talk English outside of school. On the other hand, Oscarson & Apelgren explain that knowledge is needed in order to take advantage of pupils’ experiences and interests. They also say that many pupils ask their teachers questions about lyrics, texts, instructions and other material that they have brought to school. Teachers should take advantage of the interests that the pupils show since this could lead to an increase in pupils’ learning if he or she for example can learn words from a text of his or her own choice. Therefore it is important for both teachers and future teachers to have knowledge of adolescents’ thoughts and perceptions of English outside of school in order to take advantage of this language development in the classroom.

Conclusions

As a teacher to be I have found it very useful to get a picture of adolescents’ thoughts and perceptions of English in their spare time. As stated above, adolescents all have many thoughts and perceptions of English in their spare time. There are no definite answers to where adolescents meet English in their spare time, how they use the language and how they learn the language outside of school. All young people are different and they all come in contact with English through different sources. They use the language depending on their interests and they all go about learning English outside of school in different ways. This is something both me as a future teacher and teachers who are already working, must take advantage of during English lessons. We need to encourage our pupils to use English not only in school but also outside of school. Although many adolescents already use English outside of school we have seen that weaker pupils do not engage as much in activities where English is involved during their spare time. This group of pupils needs to be motivated so that they dare to use the language both in and outside of school. It is easier for pupils to reach the “goals to aim
for” in the syllabus for English if they dare to use the language both in and outside of school.

As we can see, a study such as this one provides a personal voice from adolescents about their thoughts on English in their spare time. Reports show statistics and are based on surveys. My study is based on interviews which allow the young people to express their own perceptions and thoughts. A study like this is important in order to understand adolescents’ real thoughts and perceptions of English outside of school.

Questions that I come to think of are: How can we take advantage of the English adolescents meet in their spare time? and How can we encourage young people to use English both in and outside of school? Research in this area has already begun but questions like these are worth looking into and they could be the starting point for further research.
References


Oral sources

Interview, Daniel (2006-04-20)

Interview, Emma (2006-04-19)

Interview, Martin (2006-04-20)

Interview, Sara (2006-04-19)
Appendix

Interview guiding questions

1. In which contexts do you meet English in your spare time?
   (I vilka sammanhang möter du engelska på din fritid?)

2. In what way do you feel that you learn English in these contexts?
   (På vilket sätt tycker du att du lär dig engelska i dessa sammanhang?)

3. How often do you believe that you are learning English when you are for example watching TV or film?
   (Hur ofta tycker du att du lär dig engelska när du ser på t.ex. tv och film?)

4. Where do you use English in your spare time?
   (Var använder du dig av engelska på din fritid?)

5. Tell me about an occasion when you have used English outside of school?
   (Berätta om ett tillfälle då du har använt dig av engelska utanför skolan?)

6. In what ways do you use English on the Internet?
   (Hur använder du dig av engelska på internet?)

7. If you have been abroad, in what ways have you used English there?
   (Om du har varit utomlands, hur har du använt dig av engelska där?)

8. How much do you understand when watching English TV or film without reading the subtitles?
   (Hur mycket förstår du när du ser på engelskspråkig tv eller film utan att läsa textremsan?)

9. How can you use the English you learn in your spare time in school?
   (Hur kan du använda dig av den engelska du lär dig på fritiden i skolan?)

10. How can you use the English you learn in school in your spare time?
    (Hur har du användning av den engelska som du lär dig i skolan på fritiden?)

11. Where have you gotten your knowledge of English from?
    (Var har du fått dina kunskaper i engelska från?)

12. How do you judge your own knowledge of English?
    (Hur bedömer du dina egna kunskaper i engelska?)