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Homework for English from the Students’ Perspective

Läxor i Engelska ur ett Elevperspektiv

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Abstract

This study investigates students’ beliefs and thoughts on homework for English. Two focus group interviews were conducted at the senior level of a compulsory school in the south of Sweden. From the interviews, we see that the students see an increasing vocabulary as the main purpose for homework in the English classroom, and that homework as such is never discussed in class. All students feel stressed because of homework, but a solution to this would be to have extra time in school for doing their homework. Moreover, the home context is an important factor in a student’s engagement in homework. In addition, the results show that vocabulary learning is the most frequent homework task for English, and that this is also the most preferable task. Finally, it seems that homework tasks are not individualised in the English classroom.

To conclude, it is suggested that homework should be discussed more widely, and that the different assignments for English are varied and based upon different learner strategies.

Keywords: Homework, English as a foreign language, student perceptions, engagement, homework assignments
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In many ways homework is an enigmatic part of school. In Sweden it is not mentioned explicitly at all, neither in the National Curriculum, nor in the syllabus for English. It is, however, mentioned implicitly. This puts a great deal of pressure on schools at the local level, since the responsibility should lie in their hands to make the vague goals to strive for in the National Curriculum more concrete. Unfortunately, my own experience from work practice tells me that this is not always the case. Homework is, as far as I have heard, rarely discussed at my partner school, nor are there any local documents on homework. Still, many times the students and my supervisor have looked confused because I have forgotten about giving the students homework for English. During my years at the School of Education homework has, as I recall it, never been formally discussed. If we add to this fact that it is rarely discussed at the local level, it should not be hard to realise that a new teacher might have problems relating to it.

I think it would be safe to say that we all connect our past and present school experiences to homework. Homework is, simply, a strong feature of the Swedish school with its roots firmly planted in our way of thinking, hence the students’ confusion when I forgot to give them homework. However, we teachers know that even though it is firmly embedded in our way of thinking, pupils still want to have their say on homework. After having listened to many pupils complaining about homework, it seems that one of the drawbacks of homework seems to relate to students’ spare time. The fact that they feel stressed has also been confirmed in a survey carried out by the Office of the Children’s Ombudsman, in which half of the students said that they felt stressed once a week or more (Barnombudsmannen, 2004). Even though this report does not talk about stress specifically in connection to homework, it seems evident that there is a link between the two. This stress and other aspects and effects of homework
have not been investigated a great deal in Sweden. There is, though, quite a lively debate on homework from the students’ point of view. Sadly, this debate probably does not reach the general public since the children are often limited to newspaper sections aimed at young people, such as Postis in *Sydsvenskan*. Also, their letters are often short and limited, and they do not provide us with a very extended picture of what they think about homework. Therefore, this study sets out to investigate homework from the students’ point of view. Thus, their opinions reflected in the media debate are the starting point of this study.

1.2 Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this investigation is to investigate some students’ thoughts and beliefs about homework for English. This is achieved by interviewing eight students, divided up into two focus groups. The students are in ninth grade, and four boys and four girls have been interviewed. The research questions of this investigation are:

- What perceptions do the students have of homework for English?
- What factors are involved in the students’ engagement in homework for English?
- To what extent do the students perceive that some homework assignments for English are preferable to others, and if so, why?

1.3 Definitions of Homework

In *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok*, the Swedish word for homework, läxa, is found in a text from as early as 1561, which indisputably shows that homework is indeed firmly rooted in our society. There is, though, a more recent definition in *Nationalencyklopedin* that says that homework is a “clearly-defined school assignment to be done at home”. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines homework in more or less the same way; it is a “schoolwork that a pupil is required to do at home”. Nevertheless, is it important to point out that the
definition used in the present investigation differs somewhat from the mentioned definitions. In this text, homework is an assignment to be completed outside of the regular lessons but not necessarily at home.

1.4 The Media Debate

Since the number of participants is limited in the present study, a contrast between the results here and the voices heard in the media debate is of importance. Therefore, this section provides a summary and a discussion of what young people have written in the media about homework. There is a focus on the same questions that the research questions deal with, i.e. perceptions of homework, engagement in homework and preferable tasks.

From a search on the internet at Mediearkivet for articles with the Swedish word for homework, läxa, in their headlines, one learns that it is a widely discussed topic in Swedish newspapers. The articles are written by many different groups of people: parents, teachers, politicians, students and investigators are all involved in the public debate on homework. However, a majority of the articles written by young people and students are mostly found in sections that are guided specifically at their age group. Examples of these sections are Postis in Sydsvenskan and Kax in Helsingborgs Dagblad.

The ways in which the articles are expressed differ. Some people have written some very well-expressed articles, using sources and arguments that support their ideas, while others choose to just briefly comment on other people’s articles without developing the topic or their own ideas and thoughts. From the students’ point of view, different opinions abound. There are articles expressing opinions in favour of homework, as well as being against it, and in between there are people that think that homework is a necessary evil. However, from a closer look at many of the articles it is obvious that there is a common ground in that many of the students think that homework is a preferable method, but that there is simply too much of it. Many articles also express a concern about homework being unfair in that some students get help at home, while others get no help at all.
Below I present some of the views on homework in relation to this study. The articles found are from as early as 2001, up until 2008. All articles are from newspapers from the south of Sweden. Since the writers seldom mention their age, it is hard to know how old they are. Nevertheless, we do get some indications from the way they express themselves. This, together with the fact that many of the newspaper columns are aimed at people up to 15, tells us that the majority of the writers should be 12-15 years old. While looking for appropriate articles, the research questions served as a base for the search criteria. This means that student perceptions and engagement in homework for English was in focus, as well as the mentioning of different tasks.

Many of the students speak well of homework in connection to the subject of English, as well as in other languages:

Homework is not fun, but English is fun sometimes. Some homework in English can be fun, such as new words. You learn a lot from that. (*Helsingborgs Dagblad*, 01/11/2003, p. 16)

If you have new words to learn in English, you need to have them for homework in order to learn properly. It is simply not enough to just go through new words in class. (*Sydsvenskan*, 03/11/2008, p. 14)

Homework should be a positive thing that the teachers give the students, as some sort of bonus, in addition to the things that you have learnt in class. For example, when you study a language. It is quite hard to learn a language without having homework, because in many cases you need to continue practicing the words at home. (*Sydsvenskan*, 20/11/2006, p. 14)

It is OK to have words for homework because they need to be studied in a different way and it can be nice to do that at home. (*Göteborgsposten*, 26/01/2002, p. 80)

(My translations)

From these quotes, we see that many students seem to agree that homework is central to the learning of new words in the subject of English. If we look at the quote from the syllabus for English that says that the students should “consciously use different ways of working to support their own learning”, we can see that homework may have served its purpose here (Skolverket, 2000). Having homework has helped the pupils to find a way of studying that supports their own learning.
Several students seem to think that homework is unfair, with regards to receiving help at home. The comments below express a concern that students without parents that can help might fall behind:

It can be unfair with homework since some parents might not be that good in, for example math, and then you will get no help with that. (Göteborgsposten, 17/10/2001, p. 7)

The solution [to homework] is longer days in school. Because then you would get the help from the teachers that you might not get at home from the adults. (Sydsvenskan, 18/11/2008, p. 11)

Here we learn that one student seems to think that longer school days could be a solution for erasing the unfairness that homework might provoke.

One of the most salient opinions in the debate is that of stress connected to homework. It seems that there is a clear tension between homework and other social activities:

I have stopped playing football because I didn’t have time for homework. (Borås Tidning, 14/04/2002, p. 6)

Every day when you come home tired from a long day in school, there is always homework. If you also have some spare time activities, it is impossible to put everything together into a timetable (Sydsvenskan, 20/11/2006, p. 14).

If you have spare time activities after a day in school, it is very hard to get going with the homework after the spare time activity that you have been on for some 2 hours (Sydsvenskan, 18/11/2008, p. 11).

Several students draw parallels to the fact that adults do not get extra work to carry out after finishing their jobs:

I’m in eight grade and I’m not very fond of homework. It should be enough just to work well during class! An adult who works at ICA and has a back problem is seldom told by the employer to weight-lift at home in order to cope with his or her job. (Sydsvenskan, 19/10/2008, p. 19)

The people who work don’t have any homework after finishing your job, because then they have finished. But so do we have! (Hallands Nyheter, 20/09/2008, p. 27)

Many students seem to be in agreement that the teachers should to a greater extent communicate with one another regarding the homework that they give their students:

Talk to each other about which homework you are planning, so that the total workload does not get too heavy. (Göteborgsposten, 17/10/2001, p. 7)
[We] think that the teachers do not show consideration for what kind of homework the others give their students, and that often results in homework in many subjects at the same day. (Borås Tidning, 14/04/2002, p. 6)

Finally, there are some students that think that homework is a good thing, and some of them, like this student, choose to look at homework from a broader perspective:

Around me everyone complains about the teacher and all the unfair homework that they get, [and] that they don’t have any spare time with all the assignments for homework. At the same time there’s a child in another country, feeling sorry for the fact that she can never ever go to school, she just helps out at home. (Sydsvenskan, 29/10/2008, p. 15).

As we have seen, there are various opinions and thoughts on homework. If we recapitulate the research questions, we learn that several of the authors of the articles perceive homework as a stressful factor that intrudes on their social activities. During weeks of much stress, they would have preferred if teachers communicated with one another in order to maintain a decent workload for the students. Homework is in some cases compared to a job that adults have. Some articles argue that a worker would never accept having to work extra after hours. Regarding engagement in homework, many students are worried about whether or not homework is fair when it comes to the help provided at home. As a solution, one article claims that extra hours in school would erase this unfairness. Finally, we see that there are many articles about homework being important for the subject of English. It is evident that many pupils think that learning new words is central to the learning of English, and that homework is the right tool for this. In addition to this, we need to include the teachers’ voices in the debate, since they are the ones who should provide the pupils with motivation, encouragement and an on-going discussion on homework. The teacher perspective is brought up in section 2.

1.5 The National Steering Documents

The Swedish national documents that are meant to guide the schools at the local level are divided up into three kinds of documents: The Education Act, the National Curricula and the course syllabi. Up until 1994, the Curricula contained many details about what teaching in the Swedish schools should be like. However, this did not rhyme well with the new ways of
looking at democracy which said that the schools at the local level should be responsible for what happened in the class rooms. Therefore, new Curricula were introduced (Skolverket, 2004, p. 12). The Curricula contain the important goals to strive for, as well as the fundamental values that need to be always present in Swedish schools. The goals to strive for describe the knowledge that every citizen needs to acquire in order to function in our society. The Curricula are complemented by syllabi. There is one syllabus for each subject in the Compulsory School, and for the Non-Compulsory School there is one for each course. The syllabi are more concrete than the Curricula, but even they are expressed in a way that allows teaching to be adapted to the local context. This brings us to the topic of this investigation and if and how homework is brought up and given support in the national documents.

**Lpo 94**

In the Curriculum of 1994, student responsibility is given an important role in learning and teaching. Since homework in many ways means that the student needs to take responsibility for a homework task, a teacher could find support for giving homework in Lpo 94. It says, for example, that one of the goals to strive for is that all pupils “take personal responsibility for their studies” (Skolverket, 1994, p.14). However, the teacher should involve the students, since

> [by] participating in the planning and evaluation of their daily education, and exercising choices over courses, subjects, themes and activities, pupils will develop their ability to exercise influence and take responsibility. (Skolverket, 1994, p. 5)

We must keep in mind that the National Curricula are vaguely worded intentionally. From the quote above, we need to draw connections to different aspects of homework. To evaluate, to be given feedback, and to be able to choose what activities to do are all essential parts and aspects of homework.

Many teachers also use homework tasks as a means of communicating with parents, and to let them in on what they are doing in school. They might, for example, ask the pupils to have their homework assignments signed by their parents. This rhymes well with the fact that “there must be close co-operation between the school and home” (p. 5). From the teacher’s perspective, one could even argue that there should be homework, since the school must create “the preconditions for developing their ability to work independently and to solve
problems” (p. 6). Thus, it seems that there are things being said about homework. We just need to keep in mind that the National Curricula are meant to be vague.

**The Syllabus for English**

Regarding homework, it is hard to find information that is more concrete than what is found in Lpo 94. The importance of learning how to take responsibility and to work independently is still stressed, as we can see from two of the goals to strive for:

The pupils should:

- 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,

- develop their ability to plan, carry out and evaluate tasks on their own and in cooperation with others. (Skolverket, 2000)

As seen, these are goals that can easily be applied to the different aspects of homework.
2 Literature Review

2.1 Previous Research

John Dennis

In Dennis’ (2007) bachelor thesis, he interviewed six teachers about their opinions on homework. His main focus was to investigate what purpose teachers had for giving homework, and how they dealt with homework at the level of the local school. According to his interviewees, homework has two main purposes, mainly those of repetition and learning to take responsibility. All six of Dennis’ interviewees said that “the purpose of homework is that the pupils learn to take responsibility, plan their work, organize their school work and develop good study technique” (Dennis, 2007, p. 28). One of the teachers added that “homework is a way for the pupil to develop an independent approach to learning. I would like to interpret homework as a form of study technique” (p 28). These comments correspond to what is written in the national documents about student responsibility and the importance of independent work. Further on, the participants in Dennis’ investigation stressed the significance of repetition in language learning. Since there is not enough time in school, homework is an important factor when developing one’s vocabulary (p. 28). From the articles in 1.4, we learn that the teachers in Dennis’ investigation and the voices from the media debate are in agreement; both sides want to highlight the importance of homework when learning new words. In connection to this, some of Dennis’ interviewees said that the pupils who do their homework perform better in tests and assessment situations (p. 29).

The negative aspect of homework that is brought up in Dennis’ investigation is that the students feel stressed. However, none of the teachers feel that the school is to blame for this stress. Instead they think that it is the students’ own fault for having too many spare-time activities. According to the teachers, the solution is that they plan their time better, and that they prioritise which activities are the most important (p. 30). If we once again look at the students’ comments in 2.1, we can see that the opinions here differ from one another. There is
nothing in the students’ comments that implies that they themselves have a part in them feeling stressed. On the other hand, the teachers in Dennis’ investigation do not seem inclined to think that supplementary classes of English would be a good idea, since “the school day is long enough for both teachers and pupils” (p. 41). Instead, they say support should be given to the students that do not get enough help at home. From my point of view, it seems that Dennis’ results need to be completed by the pupils’ viewpoint. Whether or not a student gets help at home is not just a matter of yes or no. Many factors, such as the relationship between the child and the parents, are involved.

In addition, we need to see if Dennis asked his interviewees anything in connection to whether or not the students can identify different kinds of assignments, and if some are more preferable to others. This questions touches on learner preferences, and even learner interests. Dennis asked the teachers if they individualised the homework assignments according to these factors. All of them said that due to time limitations, individualised homework tasks were not an option. One of Dennis’ interviews said that he dealt with learner preferences in his teaching, but with homework he did nothing (pp. 35-36). I believe here that a compromise between lack of time and still thinking about learner preferences could simply be to provide the students with a variety of tasks that cover several learner preferences, without for that sake having to individualise them.

**Ulf Leo**

In a master’s thesis Leo (2004) investigated the issue of homework in a qualitative study from three perspectives, namely those of the teachers, the students and the parents. Unlike the present investigation, Leo chose not to look at homework from the perspective of a specific subject. However, Leo’s findings are still relevant and comparable to this investigation.

If we look at his findings regarding the students’ perceptions of homework, we learn that they see it as a natural feature of the daily school routines. Homework is simply always present, and always has been (Leo, 2004, p. 44). As regards to the purpose of homework, a couple of students mentioned homework as a tool for revising, and they mentioned English as a subject in which homework is important (p. 44). One student said that homework could be vital for the pupils that were shy and silent in class. With homework, they got the opportunity to learn the things that their self-confidence or personality blocked them from learning in class (p. 44).
All students had in common that one of the main purposes of homework was the time factor; there just was not enough time in school to learn everything (p. 44).

With regards to what extent the students engage in homework, the home environment was brought up as an essential factor in Leo’s investigation. Parents were not always seen as a helpful resource, but they were good to have around when the students needed help. One pupil said that a parent could make homework more fun and interesting, since he said that “English is also fun to do with the parents, texts and words, but otherwise I do not think homework is fun” (p. 46). According to the participants in Leo’s investigation, homework and stress seemed to be linked together. The parents were also brought up in connection to stress. The pupils said that they were often asked by their parents if they needed any help, but in many cases the parents themselves were too stressed to help them. However, they still said that the same results could be achieved without their help (p. 47). This is interesting, especially since some articles from the media debate express a concern that homework can be unfair, i.e. some students get more help at home than others. Unfortunately, Leo does not provide the reader with his interviewees’ home context.

None of the pupils could imagine a school without homework. On the one hand, the pupils said that not having homework would be detrimental to their learning of new things. On the other hand, they seemed to think that it would create a “crisis” in the classroom (p. 49). Homework was seen as a way of showing the teacher that the pupil had accomplished a certain task. If there were no homework, the classroom would turn into a competitive arena in which the pupils compete for the teacher’s attention (p. 49). This strikes me as alarming, since it shows that these pupils evidently had not been included in a discussion on the purposes of homework, such as learning how to take responsibility. When asked to express their opinions on to whom the homework was for, a majority of the pupils answered that homework was there for the teacher’s sake, and not for them (p. 47). This shows that there was a lack of student influence. The students had simply not been informed about some of the positive outcomes of homework. This is also mentioned in Leo’s investigations, as he concludes that he sees “no sign of discussions on homework in the class council, or that homework is brought up in connection with student influence” (p. 50). Considering some of the objectives on student influence, these findings are worrying. One pupil in Leo’s investigation says that the teacher listens if they complain about the workload. However, student influence and
student democracy needs to go beyond just listening to students’ complaints; it needs to include discussions that are much more profound and all-embracing.

Leo concludes by stating that if there has to be homework, it needs to be brought up in the national steering documents, since “there is nothing that controls homework in the school of today. The school is not instructed to give homework to pupils” (Leo, 2004, p 4). Evidently, what Leo looked for was homework mentioned explicitly. I disagree with Leo here. As clearly shown in 1.5, a teacher who uses homework can easily find support for it in Lpo94, and in the syllabi.

2.2 A Framework for Investigating Homework

Hughes and Greenhough conducted a longitudinal study between 1999 and 2000 in a British context. While working on the study, homework was widely discussed among educational policymakers. It resulted in the publication of homework guidelines from DFEE, the Department for Education and Employment. The documents provided instructions on how much time should be spent on homework for each age, and gave a variety of concrete examples (Poulson & Wallace, 2004, p 87). Thus, in contrast to Sweden, homework is dealt with in different ways. In Britain, homework is discussed explicitly, while as in Sweden we tend to focus more on the implicit outcomes of homework, such as learning how to take responsibility.

Hughes’ and Greenhough’s purpose was to investigate the role that homework has in student learning, to examine some of the different aspects of homework, and how they can enhance or reduce learning. In order to do so, they designed a conceptual framework that was used to carry out the project. The framework shows the different parts in connection to homework that can help us understand why a specific task is successful or not. Parts of their framework have been used in the present investigation, meaning that the research questions and the interviews are based on it. The framework is shown in the figure below:
Figure 1. Hughes’ and Greenhough’s conceptual framework

(a) Classroom context: Here the teacher is central to the understanding of the different dimensions of homework, since it is he or she that sets the scene. If the pupils are to understand the purpose of homework and to be involved in the process of planning it, the teacher needs to be open to discussions and student influence on the matter. The
classroom context influences the student’s engagement with the homework, as well as the different tasks.

(b) **Student engagement with task:** This part deals with how much time and energy is spent on homework. It is, as seen in figure 1, closely related and influenced by the other parts of the framework used here.

(c) **Student characteristics:** Obviously, the student characteristics influence the student’s engagement with homework. Included in this part of the framework are the attitudes that the pupil has towards homework: Do they see that there are any advantages of homework? Do they think that there are any good alternatives to homework? I have also included stress in connection to homework, since it in many ways reflects a person’s personality and interests. In order to understand to which extent a pupil feels stressed, and how this affects his or her attitude to homework, it is fundamental to understand the balance between doing homework tasks and other social activities.

(d) **Home context:** According to the framework, the home context is also important for the student’s engagement in homework. To understand the home context, we need to know to what extent a pupil is helped by parents and / or siblings, and how they value homework.

(e) **Nature of task:** This part of the framework is closely connected to the teacher and the classroom context, and will of course affect the pupil’s engagement in a homework task. To what extent can the pupil identify different kinds of homework tasks, and how does he or she value them?

It should be obvious that there are no clear boundaries between many of the parts of the framework. As Hughes & Greenhough point out, the framework “is inevitably a simplification of what are likely to be quite complex processes” (p 90). However, I believe that it can still be useful in its visual form in order to make visible the different aspects of homework.
3 Method

In this section the reader is introduced to some definitions of focus group interviews. Furthermore, there is a review and a discussion on the selection of this investigation. Finally, the procedure is reviewed. Concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the method, the interviews are discussed in connection with the results in section 5.

3.1 Qualitative Focus Group Interviews

The method that has been chosen for this investigation is that of the qualitative interview. One of the characteristics of the qualitative interview is that the interviewer asks plain and straight questions, and will in return get complex, nuanced answers. Thus, the interviewer will afterwards have a material rich on opinions, patterns and thoughts on the topic at hand (Trost, p. 7). Another reason for conducting qualitative interviews is to be able to contrast the results with those of Dennis (2007) and of Leo (2004), who both used qualitative interviews. However, considering the fact that the area of this investigation touches on general opinions, I could run the risk of not getting any nuanced answers. After all, homework is, as already mentioned, a fairly unquestioned topic, which means that the interviewees might not have thought about it before. I have therefore carried out the interviews as focus groups interviews. Although it is called a focus group interview, it looks more like a discussion. The interviewer makes sure that the discussion stays focused on the topic at hand, but other than that it is the interviewees’ discussion that is central. The role of the interviewer looks like that of an observer (Trost, p. 24). The focus group interview originates from the field of sociology, but it is now widely used in many different fields (Hatch, 2002, p. 24). A focus group consists of a set of individuals who have something in common. They might, for example, have similar characteristics or have shared experiences. Hatch uses Morgan’s words when he says that one of the characteristics of the focus group interview is its use of group dynamics in order to gain
the data needed. Without the focus group, it would be more difficult to attain the same data (p. 24).

### 3.2 Selection of Participants

I chose to interview eight interviewees from the ninth grade, mainly for two reasons. The first reason is, again, connected to previous investigations. To be able to contrast the results, it is better to have the same age groups. The second reason is due to the fact that I believed that students in the ninth grade would be able give me a variety of thoughtful answers on my questions. Regarding the participants, I aimed at having a variety of people involved. I wanted to have representatives from both sexes, as well as students of different ethnic backgrounds. With regards to grade, the school itself has already made a distinction between different pupils, since the English groups are divided up into three groups: G, VG and MVG. I chose to have two focus groups with four students in each group: one from the G group and one from the MVG group. This gave me the opportunity to contrast their answers to one another, without me being the one categorising them.

With regards to different personalities, it was vital to choose the appropriate participants. In order to get the data needed, the informants needed to have “knowledge about everyday life in the settings being studied, and […] willing to communicate that knowledge” (Hatch, p. 98). Hatch has designed a number of strategies involved when considering which participants to include (p. 98). The maximum variation samples are chosen when we want to have individuals with different opinions on the same topic (p. 98). Therefore, I talked to the students’ teachers to see if they could recommend any students in particular, with regard to their personalities. Since the school in which I placed the investigation has divided the students up into G, VG and MVG-groups, the teachers suggested that the different groups might have different opinions on homework. Consequently, the teachers gave me suggestions on eight appropriate individuals for the investigation. Both teachers felt certain that these students would give provide me with a varied and rich material on the subject of homework, since their experience told them that among the eight there would be both opinions in favour
and against homework. On the basis of these suggestions I picked out the eight participants needed, who all ultimately approved of participating in the study.

Obviously there can be ethical dilemmas involved in selecting participants with different grades. However, comparing students with different grades, and thus compartmentalizing them, is not the purpose of this investigation. Since not even society nor researchers can agree on whether the many aspects of homework are favourable, nor can we value the beliefs on homework that two groups of students have. The two groups of students were told that both G- and MVG students were interviewed, and I stressed the fact that there were no good or bad opinions. Everything they said was important and not valued according to a predetermined scale of right or wrong.

3.3 Procedures

The interviews were held in Swedish at the senior level of a compulsory school (högstadium). The school in which the interviews were conducted is placed in a small community of the south of Sweden. Early in the process of writing this thesis, I talked to the headmaster of the school in order to get permission to conduct the interviews that were needed. Since I have done my working practice there and am therefore well-known at the school, he believed that there was no need to contact the parents of the eight nine-graders that I was to interview. After having discussed the matter with the English teachers, I had eight particular individuals in mind. I approached them all individually and informed them about the investigation that I was working with. Although the headmaster thought there was no need to involve their parents, I still asked all eight students to make sure that their parents knew about the interviews. I also gave the students my mobile phone number and told them that they themselves and their parents were welcome to call me about any questions that came up. Two dates were decided upon during which the students had extra classes exclusively for homework, a so-called resource class. The teachers of this class were also informed. Two interviews were consequently conducted, with four interviewees in each group. The interviews were recorded with a tape recorder, and the participants were told that the recordings as such would not be used or played in public. In addition, the students were
specifically informed about their anonymity in this investigation, and how their identities in the final product would not be revealed.
4. Results

In this section, the results from the interviews will be presented. A deeper analysis of the results is found in chapter 5. The results are divided up into sections and subsections which all correspond to the interview questions, which in their turn are based on the research questions. Four boys and four girls from the ninth grade were interviewed. As mentioned, the students were interviewed according to the group that they were in, i.e. one G group and one MVG group. They have been given the following fictitious names:

The G group: Martin, William, Maria and Teresa.

The MVG group: Sara, Felizia, Henrik and Philip.

Although the interviews were conducted in Swedish, all quotes below have been translated into English.

4.1 Students’ perceptions of homework

At the very beginning of the interviews all students were asked to express what they thought about homework. Here are some of the comments that came up:

“They suck” (Maria).

“Homework is tiresome” (Martin).

“Homework is good, but sometimes there is too much of it” (Teresa).

“You learn a lot from it“ (William).

“I don’t like homework, but I guess we learn a lot from it” (Sara).
As we can see, it seems that their opinions on homework embrace various standpoints. Some of the students are very negative to homework, while as others are inclined to see it as a necessary evil.

Perceived reasons for homework in English

All eight students, without exceptions, said that the main reason for having homework is that they learn more from it. Philip believed that homework in English “increases one’s vocabulary,” while as Felizia pointed out that they would have had worse results on their tests if they had not had homework. Martin also added that he had got the impression that homework was sometimes given because they did not listen to the teacher. Teresa, as well as being positive to homework, said confidently that homework was given so that they would learn how to take responsibility. She was the only one who brought up the issue of responsibility at this stage of the interview.

Student involvement in the planning of homework

According to the majority of the eight students, homework is rarely discussed in class. The MVG students said that it was brought up in the beginning of the term in the English classroom, but only for a discussion about for which weekday the homework would be for. The G students claimed that they were not involved at all in the process of planning homework. All interviewees from both groups said, however, that their English teachers listened to them if they should happen to have too much homework during a certain week. At this stage of the interviews, both groups started discussing the lack of communication between teachers of different subjects. Henrik stressed the fact that the teachers should talk to one another during periods of many tests and exams. In spite of this, he and the other MVG students seemed to be in agreement that they did not have much homework in English.

Homework and stress

All students said that homework created stress, especially in connection to other spare time activities. It seemed that all of them had come up with a system that allowed them to combine homework with other activities, but Sara admitted that she sometimes had to skip football class in favour of her homework. She also added that because of homework, she always had to plan her spare time thoroughly. William, on the other hand, said that he just wanted to “get it over with”, so he did his homework directly after school in order to be able to feel free.
Teresa made an interesting priority in that she saw sleeping as less important: “I do my homework during night-time, so that I can hang out with my friends. The bad thing about this is that I’m completely done for on Friday evening.” With regards to homework in English, two of the MVG students stuck out. Philip confessed that he did not spend much time with his English homework, and Felizia said that she felt that they did not get much homework, which meant that she was able to put her training first.

**Alternatives to homework**

At the school at which the interviews were held, the ninth graders are given a so-called “Resurslektion”, which is an extra lesson where they can work with their homework in any subject. One English teacher and one Swedish teacher are present, which means that there is a focus on these two subjects. All interviewees said that this extra lesson was good for them. Since I myself have participated in this class several times, my view on it was similar to that of Teresa: “if you end up sitting next to your friends during the resource class, you end up doing nothing”. Paradoxically, it was Teresa who said that homework was an important tool when learning how to take responsibility. On the question of whether or not extra time in school and with no homework to do at home would be good, their opinions were quite alike. All of the MVG students said that they had preferred having extra time and help in school in all subjects in order to get professional help from the teachers, and so did William and Martin in the G group. Teresa was the only one of the eight who disagreed, as we have seen from the quote above. She felt that she could only get things done when alone and at home. When the subject of a school completely without any homework was brought up, everybody agreed on that there would be a decrease in knowledge. Amongst the MVG students, the discussion here was more about vocabulary when it came to English. Felizia claimed that without homework in English, she would “get worse vocabulary, but other than that there would not be any great set-backs”.

**Homework and learning to take responsibility**

As mentioned above, Teresa in the G group was the only one who brought up the topic of responsibility in connection to homework. Even so, when I asked them about whether they had heard about it being brought up in the Curriculum and the syllabus, everyone said that they knew about it. Again, everyone one agreed that homework was an efficient tool when learning how to take responsibility. When asked if they believed that this was the case for
everyone, many had problems putting themselves in someone else’s shoes. Nonetheless, Sara reflected over the fact that there were some people in her previous English group that did not do their homework, and she believed that this was strongly connected to their lower grades. Maria in the G group admitted that even though she did not approve at all of homework, “it is, actually, a really good way of learning how to take responsibility, since you need to carefully plan your time and your school work.”

4.2 Engagement in homework

In general, the MVG students felt that they spent less time on their English homework than the G students. Henrik and Felizia said that they needed some 30 minutes per week, while Philip settled for only 15 minutes. With this in mind, we should remember that the same students felt that their workload with regards to homework for English was light. Maria, Teresa and William needed at least an hour per week for their homework, while Martin said that he tried to finish his English homework during both his regular classes and the resource class. As regards to where they do their homework, everyone said that they preferred to do it on their own in their rooms at home.

Help at home

Maria and William from the G group, and Henrik and Philip from the MVG group all said that they thought that it was important to have help at home, and they all took advantage of that help. Maria added that “my mother has lived seven years in the US, which is a great advantage for me”. Sara in the G group found herself in a different situation: “I think it is very important to be helped at home, but unfortunately my parents, since we come from another country, cannot help me that much. They’re not at all good at English, but still they do their best to help me.” Martin, on the other hand, confessed that he had never reflected upon whether or not he could be helped at home, because, as he himself put it; “I don’t want it to look as if I need help.” After saying this, he looked ashamed and made it clear that he did not want to develop his thoughts. During the discussion on help at home, I got the impression that a couple of the students felt reluctant to talk about it. I tried to be as sensitive as I could during this part of the interviews so that I did not put anyone on the spot.
With regards to other sources of help at home, it seems that a majority of those with siblings could not get any help from them. Martin, Felizia, Philip and Teresa expressed a tension between themselves and their siblings when it came to helping each other with school work. Felizia, who had said that she did not need any help at home, said that “I have elder siblings, but they have never looked at my homework, they simply just don’t care.” Both Felizia and Philip claimed that the Internet was of great help when doing their homework at home. William, in the G group, said that his siblings all thought that homework was as boring as he did, but that they helped each other as much as they could. As for Maria, she mentioned the fact that she has an elder sister who studies in the US, and that “we really shouldn’t complain, she has a lot more homework than we do.”

4.3 Different homework tasks for English

Similar to many of their responses as to what the reasons are for homework, a majority of the interviewees said that homework was mainly about learning new words and increasing their vocabulary. It seems, however, that there is greater variety in the MVG group. Although admitting that the focus is on learning new words, Philip said that “each time we read a novel, we need to write a book review on it, mainly at home.” Sara, also in the MVG group, added that they had started on writing a diary on what they did during the weekends. The diary was to be written primarily at home. As Sara was talking about this, it was obvious that she liked the task, mainly because, as she put it, “new things are always fun.” On hearing this, Maria and Martin in the G group expressed envy, saying that new things and new tasks always made studying more fun. In the G group, the primary focus was on learning new words and to translate full sentences. William, however, said that they sometimes were given a short novel to read at home, but according to him, it did not feel like homework in that sense, because it was a so-called “to-do task”, which meant that they were not tested on it. Students from both groups also added that they sometimes had to learn new grammar for a test. There seemed, however, to be more grammar in the MVG group, both when it came to homework and tests.
Preferable tasks

All students agreed that learning new words was, without doubt, the best way to learn English. Many of them talked about vocabulary training as something that provided them with fast and evident results. Reading was, for example, never mentioned as a way of learning about other cultures and other ways of living, but was only another way of learning new words: “When you read a book, you learn how the sentences should be, but of course you also learn new words” (Maria). Perhaps this goes hand in hand with the fact that, as mentioned in 4.1, homework is rarely discussed in class.

Tasks adapted to the individual

When the topic of whether or not homework was individualised in class, several of the interviewees had problems understanding what was meant. After explaining that I was referring to adapted homework tasks according to the aptitude and interests of the learner, Sara explained to me what it was like before they were divided up into the G-, VG- and MVG groups. They were then given different amounts of new words for homework, depending on what grade they were aiming at. But now that they were in different groups, homework was always the same for everyone within that one group. Sara also added that they in the beginning of every new term were asked by the teacher if there were any changes or any new ideas that needed to be discussed regarding homework. This was interpreted by the interviewees as a way of individualising homework for the whole group, but not for the individual. When they were asked about individualised tasks in subjects in which they are not divided into groups, Henrik said, “no way! At least not with that teacher”! Felizia added that, “one would never get another task by saying that it wasn’t fun enough”, implying that one’s interest was not highly valued in some of their teachers’ classrooms.
5 Discussion

In this section I start by discussing the trustworthiness of the results, and to what extent they can be used to draw general conclusions. The second part deals with the results in the light of the national steering documents and previous investigations that have been made.

5.1 Evaluation of results

In order to be able to draw conclusions and recommend further research on the basis of the present investigation, we need to know how the results can be evaluated (Johansson & Svedner, 2006, p. 106).

Regarding to what extent we can draw general conclusions from the results, one needs to take a cautious attitude when the investigation is set at a school in which the work practice has taken place (Johansson & Svedner, p. 106). The problem lies in the fact that the selection of the interviewees is based on personal contacts, thus risking that the interviews become too informal and personal. I believe, though, that this has not been the case here, since the relationship between the interviewees and I was at the stage where we only knew of each other. We also have the fact that since the school has already divided them up, they were able to be interviewed according to their grade. Thanks to this, I believe that one can contrast their answers to one another without running the risk of ethical dilemmas.

The trustworthiness of the results also needs to be considered. The two interviews were conducted under the same premises, with exactly the same questions and topics discussed. However, since the MVG group was interviewed first, some comments on, for example, different homework tasks in that specific group were discussed. I later brought up what the MVG students had said in the interview with the G group. This meant that only one of the groups got to hear and comment on what other group said. Nevertheless, this was restricted to
a very limited number of discussion topics, and the end results have not been affected. In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that much effort was made on constructing interview questions with open-ended answers. In sum, I believe that the results show a high level of reliability.

Furthermore, I think a personal reflection is at its place. The interviews that were conducted were supposed to be focus groups interview. However, even though I made sure that there were good group dynamics in both groups, I felt that they were sometimes reluctant and even unenthusiastic regarding certain issues. This forced me to sometimes take more control over the interviews that I had anticipated. Later, when I was working with transcribing the interviews, I realised that several of the interviewees seemed to express a despair regarding the fact that homework was rarely discussed in class. I strongly believe that if the students are used to discussing and debating, they will then be better at sharing and giving their opinions. Perhaps they would have been more willing to discuss if I had given them some points to reflect on beforehand, so that they would had felt better prepared before the interview. This has of course affected the results, in the way that the material might be poorer. Nonetheless, the thoughts and the beliefs of homework that the students expressed are still there, and I still consider the results to be comparable to other investigations.

5.2 Discussion of results

In discussing the results, my research questions again serve as a foundation for the structure.

What perceptions do the students have of homework for English?

To begin with, it seems that all the interviewees share the same opinion on the purpose of homework with the many voices from the media debate. That is, homework in English has mainly the advantage of increasing the students’ vocabulary. With regards to their opinion on homework in general, it appears, though, that everyone is not equally pleased. One thing that is brought up by one student in this investigation, but not at all in the media debate, was that homework serves as a way of teaching them how to take responsibility. This is brought up as an essential aspect of the school in the national documents. Student responsibility is
mentioned as an aspect of homework in Leo’s investigation. When he looks at the steering documents, he disregards the fact that they are vaguely worded, thus stating that that homework is not mentioned at all in the documents. The teachers in Dennis’ investigation all saw that one of the main purposes of homework was that of learning to take responsibility, and when the interviewees of the present investigation were asked about the matter, all agreed that homework was a good tool for it.

According to the results of this investigation, homework needs to be discussed to a far greater extent. Neither the students here, nor the ones in Leo’s investigation, claimed to be involved in the process of planning homework. This definitely clashes with the aims stated in the Curricula, seeing as student involvement is one of the basic values that the foundation of our school system consists of. One of the teachers in Dennis’ investigation claimed that she did discuss it in class, but that the discussion is “not always understood nor accepted by all” (Dennis, 2007, p. 35). This indicates that there is a discussion in some schools, but that it needs to be a regular feature of teaching. Along with this, it seems that students from both the present and the previous investigations, as well as from the media debate, want the teachers to discuss homework with each other to a greater extent. In spite of this fact, a majority of the students of this investigation say that their English teachers listen to them when the workload is too heavy.

Apparently, stress in connection to homework is a fact. Homework clashes with other social activities, as well as with their social life, although the total amount of homework in English does not seem to be a problem for some of the students with higher grades. The teachers in Dennis’ investigation are not inclined to take the blame for this stress. Instead they say that the students themselves are to blame for having too many activities during their spare time. From the students’ perspective, I have not been able to confirm this, neither in this investigation nor in the media debate. It looks, though, as if many students would prefer having extra time in school in order to get a more humane workload. Leo is in agreement here, since he states that “all teaching should take place in school. This would lead to the disappearance of homework as a feature of school” (Leo, 2004, p. 57). There is a danger, though, in formally introducing extra classes for homework. My experience tells me that some students will see these classes as more of a social venue in which they can catch up for lost time with their friends. It needs to be restricted so that it serves its purpose. Finally, it seems that a majority of students believe that a school without homework would affect their learning
of both English and other subjects negatively. However, some voices in the media debate do not approve at all of homework, since they compare school to a job that adults have. This comparison has not been made in any of the investigations mentioned here.

**To what extent do the students engage in their homework for English?**

Although it is hard to draw general conclusions, we can see that the MVG students in this study feel that they have a lesser amount of homework, and spend less time on their English homework than the G students. With regards to where they prefer to do their homework, everyone said that the only option was at home, excluding, of course, the extra so-called resource class that they are provided with.

Concerning the home context, it is more difficult to find a common ground from the students’ perspective. In the media debate some articles express a concern for homework being unfair, since not all pupils can get the same help at home. This, perhaps quite insightful, view on homework has not been confirmed in this investigation, mainly because the home context can be a sensitive topic to discuss. Still, we learn from both this investigation and from Leo that many students have access to help at home, and that many students take advantage of this help. Many students seem to imply, though, that they would have done quite well even without this help. In addition, we know that homework can also serve as a means of communication between the school and the home. This is an important aspect of homework that is also brought up in the Curricula. We must keep in mind, though, that there are many factors involved regarding whether or not a student is helped at home. The parents’ situation, the siblings’ relationship to each other and many other factors are involved. As far as I am concerned, we can therefore not only give homework because we want to build bridges between the school and the family members.

**To what extent do the students perceive that some homework assignments for English are preferable to others, and if so, why?**

The participants in this investigation, together with the ones in Leo’s study, talk about vocabulary learning as central to homework in English. There are of course other assignments, but several of them, such as reading, all seem to boil down to increasing one’s vocabulary. There is, at the same time, a contradiction here in the sense that the students prefer learning new words, and simultaneously speak highly of having varied and new homework assignments. The teachers in Dennis’ study mention a variety of tasks that they
give their students, but since we only get the teachers’ perspective, we cannot know for sure
that the students see it the same way. On the other hand, we face the same problem with this
investigation; here we only get the students’ perspective. In spite of this, I see a difficulty in
the fact that the students only see, and prefer, vocabulary learning in the English classroom.
Perhaps without being aware of it, the students can find support in the steering documents
when they say that they want to have a variety of homework assignments, since

[by] providing a wealth of opportunities for discussion, reading and writing, all pupils
should be able to develop their ability to communicate and thus enhance confidence in
their own language abilities. (Skolverket, 1994, p. 6)

Finally, we have also learnt from the results of this investigation that homework is rarely
adapted to the individual learner. I believe here that there needs to be a compromise between
an adaption to the individual and the precious, but limited, time that we teachers have. A
focus on a strictly limited amount of different homework tasks will not cover everyone’s
needs and learner preferences in a classroom, but a variety of tasks will. And once again, to
look at our pupils as individuals, and not as a collective, is highly valued in the national
steering documents.

Finally, we need to once again look at Hughes’ and Greenhough’s framework in order to see
how different parts there interact with one another in this study. The figure below is a
simplification of the figure in 2.5, here adapted to the results of this study:
Figure 2. The framework adapted to the results

From the figure, we clearly see how the different parts interact and affect each other. The classroom context, as well as the home context affect how the student looks upon and perceives homework, as well how homework affects him or her as regards to stress. Together, these three all interact together and influence how the way in which the student engages in homework. When compared to the figure in 2.3, we see that there are many similarities. In other words, the Swedish and the British contexts are not that different from one another. This information would seem useful for researchers who want to study this further.
6 Conclusions

Lastly, we need to once again look at the research questions:

- What perceptions do the students have of homework for English?

We now know that the participants in this study see that learning new words is the main purpose of homework for English. Another purpose which they agree upon, but do not mention themselves, is that of learning how to take responsibility. A theory has been mentioned that says that one of the reasons for them not mentioning student responsibility is the fact that homework is not discussed enough in class. The students need to be involved to a greater extent, and this is also stressed in the national steering documents. Another kind of stress that is not brought up in these documents is the stress that the students feel because of homework. According to the students, it appears that the solution would be to have supplementary classes in school for homework.

- To what extent do the students engage in their homework for English?

According to this study, the MVG students have less work to do at home for English than the G students. At home, a majority of the interviewees say that they get help at home with their homework. Since discussing the home context tends to be a sensitive topic of discussion, I have chosen not to focus on the differences between the students here. However, we have learnt that there are many factors to consider before we make statements about what role the home context has to homework.

- To what extent do the students perceive that some homework assignments for English are preferable to others, and if so, why?

The participants in this study highlight vocabulary learning as central to homework for English, even though the MVG students seem to be subjected to a more extended variety of assignments. They all express a wish to have more varied homework tasks, and this wish is
also expressed in Lpo94. To have a smorgasbord of homework assignments can most likely serve as a good method to reach all students, no matter their learner preferences.

As for further research, I see now that it is evident that a study should take place that includes triangulation with one single class or group of students in focus. A case study of a specific homework task in which we could see how the different parties perceive the task and how they interact with one another would provide us with a number of insights on the matter of homework.

To conclude on a personal note, I believe that I now see homework from both my own perspective, as well as from my students’. With homework I can fulfil some of the goals in the national steering documents, irrespective of it being carried out in school or at home. I have also learnt that homework can be an insightful topic of discussion in the classroom. When I involve the students in planning homework, I exercise student democracy as well as giving the students an opportunity to practice on sharing their opinions on something that affects their every-day lives. Finally, I also feel confident in knowing that there are many students who do see homework for English as a tool with which they can learn more English. In sum, I strongly believe that this study has broadened my horizons as a future teacher.
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Appendix

Interview Schedule

• *Attitudes towards homework*

  - What advantages and/or disadvantages do you see about homework for English?
  
  - How do the students perceive the reasons for getting homework for English? To what extent are they involved in the process of setting and planning homework? To what extent is homework discussed in class?
  
  - To what extent is homework stressful? To what extent does homework intrude on their social activities outside of school? To what extent do the students find that they have enough time for doing their homework for English?
  
  - Which alternatives to homework are there? What would it be like without homework for English? To what extent are they given extra time in school for homework, and what do they think about that?
  
  - The curriculum and the syllabus say that the students need to learn how to take responsibility. To what extent is homework an effective instrument for this?)

• *Engagement in homework*

  - How much time is spent on homework in general? Time spent on English homework?
  
  - What do they think about being helped by someone at home when doing their homework for English? Do they have any siblings? If yes, what do their siblings think about homework? Who else can they turn to for help?
- Where and how do they prefer to do their homework? Alone? With others? In school? At home?

**The nature of homework tasks**

- To what extent do they see that there are different kinds of homework tasks for English? Which are the different tasks?

- To what extent do they see that different tasks are better than others, regarding how they learn new things? To what extent have they found a way to do their homework that suits them the best?

- To what extent do they think that homework tasks are adapted to the individual learner’s level and ways of learning English?)