Students’ Attitudes to English Accents in Four Schools in Southern Sweden

What lies behind the attitudes towards different accents?

Studenters attityd till engelska dialekter från fyra skånska skolor, och vad som ligger bakom dessa attityder

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English accents
Abstract

The aim of this paper is to report on students’ attitudes and their awareness towards different English accents. With changes in the latest Swedish syllabus for English (Lgr11), the aim is no longer to sound in a specific way by speaking with a certain accent. This has been the case since 2000, but the Nativeness principle is still powerful. However, we discuss that a clear pronunciation is important for students and teachers a requisite for being understood and avoiding confusion. Students in four different schools, secondary and upper secondary schools, took part in our research by answering a questionnaire. We found that many students were aware of different accents, but also that students preferred the Inner Circle accents with AmE and BrE being the most popular ones. Also, we found a difference between secondary and upper secondary students where teacher influence was more important to the former and personal preferences to the latter.

Keywords: Accent, pronunciation, comprehension, intelligibility, ESL, EIL, EFL, ELF, English as a Global Language
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1 Introduction

Many textbooks in English, e.g. *Wings* 7 (2002), present a varied picture of English accents. More specifically, many textbooks (and workbooks) illustrate all of the major spoken dialects of English (BrE, AmE, AuE, etc.). In this paper, we attempt to shed light on what pronunciation and accents students want to speak and also be taught.

We remember during secondary and upper secondary school how we were encouraged to use only BrE. Some students who spoke AmE were even threatened with failing their courses. Perhaps, this will not be the case anymore, since Skolverket in its syllabus for English states that “spoken English with some regional and social variants” is to be taught (Skolverket, 2011, p. 34). This is clearly seen in many textbooks, and we have found that, in most cases, even contemporary textbooks such as *Happy* (2004), *A Piece of Cake* (1999) and *What’s up*? 6 (2005) introduce a certain country and accent first, either the British Isles and BrE or the US and AmE. Indirectly then, many textbook authors encourage students to learn BrE or AmE. Perhaps, this could lead to problems when the students listen to American, Australian, Irish or other English accents since other accents may differ from BrE and AmE in pronunciation, intonation and even vocabulary.

According to McKay (2002), many teachers spend a lot of time repairing their own pronunciation or “other cosmetic changes to sound native” (p.42). They focus a lot on how they can lose their L1 accent, rather than how they can be successful teachers. However, Carlberg, Jamei, Onemark, and Skibdahl (2008) discovered that the teachers who they interviewed were themselves using a fusion of General American (GA) and Received Pronunciation (RP). Therefore, a deliberate enforcement of a specific accent on pupils was, according to the teachers, not in effect. The simple reason was that “as long as they speak English it does not matter”. The main goal, according to the teachers, was to encourage the class to communicate with each other in English.

Kachru (1989) developed a system of three circles describing the different users of English. He came up with the Inner Circle, being countries in which English is primarily the mother tongue (e.g. the UK, Australia, USA and Canada); the Outer Circle, where English is spoken as a L2 (second language, e.g. India and Nigeria); and the Expanding Circle – countries in which English is taught as a foreign language.
As expected, the teachers in Carlberg et al.’s study (2008), introduced varieties of English in their classrooms, and therefore also accents from the Inner Circle countries such as the Scottish, Irish, Australian, Welsh, American English, and British English that are presented in the textbooks. Although there were no signs of reluctance from the students towards dialects from the Outer or Expanding Circles; in order to ensure student development, the teachers often used varieties close to the norm of Standard English (Carlberg et al., 2008).

Carlberg et al. (2008) also looked into students’ attitudes to different English accents, and whether the students could recognize these accents. One hundred and thirteen students from grade six to nine in compulsory school and two classes in upper secondary school listened to an audio recording with accents from the Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles (Kachru, 1989) followed by a questionnaire. The students were accurate in recognising both GA and RP. They were also quite confident in recognising the Ethiopian accent (East African-English), French and Indian-English (Hinglish) dialects. They had difficulties in recognising the Argentinean accent and the Vietnamese accent (Vinglish). Nevertheless, a majority of the students were open-minded about the accents they heard and could understand them. On the other hand, there were some who criticised the language skills of the person speaking on the recording, even though some of them were native speakers. The Swedish students in the study were considered non-native speakers; still, they commented on the accents that they listened to with: “She should speak more proper English” and “You’re supposed to learn a main dialect like American or British”.

If the syllabus Lgr11 is studied even further, it is possible to notice that there is no actual mentioning of students’ accents. On the other hand, there is a whole paragraph under Interaction and Production, suggesting that intonation and pronunciation should be part of the knowledge requirements for students’ knowledge (Skolverket, 2011, p. 35). However, both intonation and pronunciation are quite different in the major Englishes. Harmer (1991) suggests teachers should focus on students’ ability to make themselves understood clearly. He also points out that the primary aim for students should be to be understood. A good pronunciation is needed for this, but not a perfect accent. According to O’Brien (2004) teachers need to spend time teaching the students the rules for word stress, rhythm and intonation in English. The teachers should also focus on individual sounds that may be difficult for the students to pronounce (cited in Gilikjani, 2011, p. 76).

In this paper, we aim at finding out what students think about different accents and what lies behind their attitudes. By getting an idea about students’ attitudes towards accents, we
can also make English classes more interesting and inspiring for the participants, through variation in tasks and also by presenting different accents for the participants.

### 1.1 Our experience

At our partner schools, our experience was that some weaker students have more knowledge of the language than they show during the lessons. One particular group (year 9) we observed was so weak that most students just barely passed or did not have a chance to get a G (at the time). However, observations in the corridors told a completely different story. When walking around the corridors, sometimes even more English than Swedish was heard (and this from the very same students that are perceived hopeless and having nearly non-existent knowledge in English). Flawless quotes in English were heard from their favorite movies, TV-series or games. Some students would even quote their favorite books, which apparently had been read in English, something that was typically impossible to achieve with this particular group during classes. Thus, it would seem that students pick up English, and their accents, from media. We aim to find out how the media, family and school influence students when speaking, and developing their English.

Since our participants are of different age groups, grades nine to twelve, we decided to investigate whether there is a difference between their attitudes. Our hypothesis is that students may have a different view towards their English in their final year before graduation, perhaps due to plans to study or travel abroad after finishing school, whereas students in secondary schools often mimic their teacher’s accent.

With this in mind, we aim to gain understanding of what accents students prefer to learn and why. Furthermore, we discuss in what situations students learn English outside of school. This understanding may help us and other English teachers to create a varied language-learning environment. According to Jenkins (1998, p. 120), influences from British and American media, local norms, and group identity are likely to interfere, to varying degrees, and prevent success in learning the language among either native or non-native users of EIL. She also claims that any neutral, universal forms of English pronunciation, simplified or otherwise, are likely to be unplanned and develop naturally from ‘below’ rather than being imposed from ‘above’ (p. 120). She also argues that, “it is a current irony that although pronunciation teaching tends to be marginalized throughout the
ELT world, it is non-native teachers who are generally the better versed in all these areas, and thus the better prepared to embark on teaching pronunciation for EIL” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 125).

1.2 Distinction between teachers’ and students’ English

In this paper, we assume that there is a difference between secondary and upper secondary school students’ choice of accents, where the younger students are more influenced by their teachers’ accent. The syllabus for English mentions a number of differences on students’ goals in the secondary and upper secondary school. For example in the first paragraph, it mentions that learning English increases the individual’s opportunities to participate in international (year 9) and global (upper secondary) studies and working life (Skolverket, p. 32 and 53). This global, rather than international, focus possibly leads teachers at the upper secondary school to guide students to a personal accent rather than following the teacher. Another difference stated by the syllabus is the knowledge requirements needed for the different grades. At upper secondary school, the focus on speaking clearly, coherently and with ease becomes more important.

Jenkins (1998, p. 125) states that all teachers, native and non-native, need to be well educated in the three phonological areas: sounds, nuclear stress and articulatory settings. They need to know how and where sounds and stress are produced. They also need to be well informed about how their students do these things in their L1 to be able to introduce contrastive work in the classroom in order to raise productive competence.

The syllabus for English highlights the importance of teaching students communication skills such as confidence in using the language and the ability to use supporting strategies (for problem solving) when language skills by themselves are insufficient (2011, p. 32). As mentioned above, the syllabus also points out that one of the methods to be used is to work on and enrich their pronunciation and intonation (Skolverket, 2011, p. 35). In the comments to the syllabus (2011), Skolverket comments further that pronunciation and intonation should be used as methods when clarification is needed. Students need to control the language linguistically (p. 9).
1.3 Teaching materials

The Common European Framework works as a guide when constructing the syllabus, which we will discuss in this paper:

The Common European Framework [CEFR] provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, syllabus guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop as to be able to act effectively, (http://www.coe.int/t/DG4/Linguistic/Source/Framework_eN.pdf, p. 1).

When describing their purpose, Skolverket writes the following on their homepage: "The Swedish Riksdag and the Government set out the goals and guidelines for the preschool and school through i.e. the Education Act and the Curricula. The mission of the Agency is to actively work for the attainment of the goals […] the municipalities and the independent schools are the principal organizers in the school system, allocate resources and organize activities so that pupils attain the national goals".
(http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/in_english)

Further down on the website can be found the following bullet list on the agency’s mission and purpose:

• drawing up clear goals and knowledge requirements
• providing support for the development of preschools and schools
• developing and disseminating new knowledge of benefit to our target groups communicate to improve

(http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/in_english)

1.4 Purpose and Research questions

The purpose of this degree paper is to investigate what kind of English accent students of two different age groups report speaking. Increased knowledge of students’ perceptions of different accents can possibly be of help for us to guide them towards the specific goals described in the syllabus. Furthermore, an understanding of how students report to have gained their accents may be a way to separate or combine methods used in school. For example, a student reports on wanting to develop their accent to be similar to one spoken in media; perhaps then media could be used further to help students obtain these specific accents even further, in school. What the student does at home could therefore become a complementing feature to their schoolwork.
Our research questions are as follows:
1. Is there awareness of different accents among the students investigated?
2. To what extent is there a difference between the accents that students in secondary and upper secondary school believe they use?

With these questions in mind, we have formed the following hypotheses:
1. There is an awareness of different accents, but the students tend to prefer the Inner Circle accents.
2. According to Levis (2005, p. 374) accent, along with other markers of dialect, is an essential marker of social belonging. Most students think that they speak with a certain accent. However, there is a difference between secondary and upper secondary school students in that teacher influence is more important to the former and personal preferences to the latter.

1.5 Word definitions

In this section we define some of the words that frequently occur in this degree paper.

1.5.1 Accent and awareness

It is important to distinguish accent from dialect. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English describes dialect as “…form of a language which is spoken only in one area, [usually] with words or grammar that are different from other forms of the same language” (p. 465). The same dictionary defines accent as “… the way someone pronounces the words of a language, showing which country or which part of the country they come from” (p. 8).

Accent is thus based only on pronunciation, whereas a specific dialect is distinguished by the phonological sounds, grammatical- and lexical differences and differences in pronunciation. David Crystal (2003) points out that accents reveal clues about people’s identities and social or regional heritance (e.g. American, British, etc.).

In our paper comprehension is closely tied to awareness. Awareness in The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English is defined in the following way: “knowledge and understanding of a particular subject …” (p. 83).
1.5.2 Intelligibility and pronunciation

*The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* presents the following definition: “If speech, writing, or an idea is intelligible, it can be easily understood” (p. 917). Throughout this paper intelligibility focuses on the fact that different accents are understood without causing confusion in the listener. Intelligibility is however not tested in this project. We concentrated instead on students’ reports on intelligibility of the different accents discussed.

Despite the current dominance of intelligibility as the goal of pronunciation teaching, both the nativeness and intelligibility principles [these will be discussed later in this paper] continue to influence pronunciation in the language syllabus, both in how they relate to communicative context and in the relationship of pronunciation to identity (Levis, 2005, p. 371).

*The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines *pronunciation* as “the way in which a language or a particular word is pronounced” (p. 1314). If we continue further and look up *pronounce* the same dictionary explains that “[to pronounce is] to make the sounds of a letter word, letter [etc], especially in the correct way” (p. 1313).

The following highlights some of the phonological differences between our five chosen accents, based on the following words: *nurse, goat, start, cure* and *bath*.

AmE use the vowel [ɜ] in *nurse*, whereas BrE becomes [ɜː]. *Goat* in AusE uses the vowel [ʌ] when IrE use [o]. IndE use [aː] in *Start* which in AmE is [ɑ]. *Cure* in BrE is generally pronounced [ʊəː] while it in AusE often becomes [ɔː] or [uː]. Finally, *Bath* in IrE is pronounced with a sharp [a] or [æ], in contrast to IndE where the vowel is closer to [aː] (Melchers & Shaw, 2003).

It is important to differentiate a general phenomenon that BrE is a non-rhotic dialect and AmE is rhotic. This means that in BrE only the [r] before a vowel is pronounced and in AmE all written [r]’s are pronounced (Melchers & Shaw, 2003).

Currently, pronunciation theory, research, and practice are in transition. Widely accepted assumptions such as the primacy of suprasegmentals, the superiority of inner-circle models, and the need for native instructors have been rightly challenged (Levis, 2005, p. 376).

1.5.3 Connected Speech

According to Rogerson-Revell (2011, p. 175), “recognition [of connected speech] is more
important than production for most L2 learners. She says, “regarding the modifications that occur in connected speech, many phonologists and pronunciation teachers agree that it seems advisable to help learners recognize native speakers’ production of such features in fluent connected speech but not encourage learners to produce all of them themselves. Priority should be given to practice with accentuation and rhythm, while linking and elisions should be given greater emphasis than assimilations” (p. 172). An awareness of some most common types of connected speech is useful for listener comprehension (Rogerson-Revel, 2011. P.177).
2 Definitions of English

In this section we will explain different terms used in our paper when it comes to English as a Second, International, Global and Foreign Language and as a Lingua Franca.

2.1 ESL, EFL and EIL

In this paper we focus on the two pedagogical terms English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as an International Language (EIL). Simply, ESL and EIL are two different pedagogical methods for teaching of English.

If you teach English as a Second Language, the focus, according to Davis (1999) eventually turns to pronunciation. The end product should thus be that the students end up with a fluent accent, and that they can speak almost perfectly without, or with very few, non-native features in their inter-language. Therefore, ESL encourages students to obtain a native-like accent, and this may become problematic since a native-like accent is extremely hard to achieve. Even the English of native speakers can sometimes be questioned when it comes to grammar, pronunciation and structure. This is where regional and social variants come into play, as Skolverket highlights (2011, p. 34). In addition, according to Crystal, a speaker’s accent is an important part of their identity (1998, p. 41).

English as an International Language (EIL), on the other hand, lowers the bar in a way and loosens the strings on the importance of pronunciation. The focus is still there, but as Gilakjani (2011) points out, acquiring a perfect accent as a non-native English speaker is highly difficult and one should, therefore, concentrate on clarity and fluency instead. Furthermore, without the positive attitude motivation and interest in achieving the accent is, in most cases, not a realistic goal to force on your students.

EIL education is also one of the aims for the Swedish school system, and in the new syllabus we can read “[…] the student express herself in relatively varied ways, clearly and coherently” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 38). Notable, however, is that this specific goal is only needed if you aim for the highest grade (A) in the ninth grade. The only thing a student is
required to achieve for the grade E, however, is speaking “simply, understandably and relatively coherently” (2011, p. 37).

With regard to English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English is primarily taught as a global means of communication. According to Seidlhofer (2005, p. 339), when people with different mother tongues need to communicate, English is the language to be used. She further discusses that, as means of communication, a paradoxical situation has occurred with this inclusion of English. The situation in this case has become apparent since the vast majority of English speakers are not speaking it as their mother tongue. However, it is primarily with these speakers, that the greatest changes and involvement with the language tend to happen (2005, p. 339).

2.2 English as a Global Language

Crystal (1997, p. 2-3) defines a global language as a language that has gained a special status in every country. He explains that this special status is achieved when the language has started to become a general norm for communication in different media and political situations. The comments to the syllabus for English discusses that interesting information today can be easily found by using different inter-media. This creates further possibilities for students to develop their language linguistically and cognitively (Skolverket, 2011, p. 11).

A language becomes global when a large number of countries decide to use the language as a means for communication when needed. The fact that English has become the L2 language choice in many language educations around the world also supports the idea of English being a global language. Crystal (1997) mentions further support for this in terms of the historical spread of English through immigration and colonization.

2.3 ELF and the LFC

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is a term that in the later years has been associated with English. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, lingua franca is defined as “a language used as a means of communication between populations speaking vernaculars that are not mutually
intelligible” (2012). English has lately started to be called a lingua franca; thus, ELF would be a language used for mutual understanding between groups of people that do not necessarily use the same mother tongue.

In 2000, Jenkins proposed a new approach when teaching English internationally. She introduced the lingua franca core (LFC). This core system contained a number of suggestions regarding how the focus of vowels, consonants and prosody should be placed and taught.

Even though the syllabus for English no longer puts focus on specific accents: pronunciation, intonation and structure are clearly highlighted. Having said that, the comments to the syllabus states that there is no specific order to teach pronunciation. Instead, it mentions how important it is to work with (Skolverket, 2011, p. 18).
3 Theoretical background

The Swedish syllabus for English states the importance of the English language and declares that the English language is often used in separate domains like politics, education and economy. Education should offer the students an opportunity to develop knowledge in contexts and parts of the world where English is used, (Skolverket, 2011, p. 32).

Leith (1997) discusses the standardization of a language and sees it as a project taking different forms at different times. According to him, changes are not merely a communal choice but involve cultivation by an elite:

It is only with hindsight, after all, that we can interpret the process at all: things may have felt very different in the past. One thing we can be clear about is that the process of standardization cannot be seen as merely a matter of communal choice, an innocent attempt on the part of society as a whole to choose a variety that can be used for official purposes and, in addition, as a lingua franca among speakers of divergent dialects. It involves from the first the cultivation, by an elite, of a variety that can be regarded as exclusive. The embryonic standard is not seen as the most useful, or the most widely used variety, but as the best. (Leith, 1997: 33)

Throughout this theoretical section, we will introduce and further elaborate how this elite cultivation happens. In Swedish schools, this influence falls primarily on Skolverket’s decisions but it also falls on choices made by the teachers who teach the language.

3.1 On pronunciation and the use of accent

This section includes previous research made on pronunciation and accent. It is followed by discussions on comprehension and pronunciation. Nativeness and Intelligibility principles are presented and this section focuses on different factors affecting our pronunciation and comprehension.
David Crystal (1997, p. 40-41) discusses the increased role of American English. In his article, Crystal contemplates the fact that American English might be taking over for other English accents in the coming decades. Some of the reasons he gives are that the majority of the world’s commercials, films and other media are sent from the United States. With this in mind, the media will mostly be using an American accent and therefore will also influence English learners. Crystal also points out that there is no risk that American English will become the standard since showing social and personal identities is more important to speakers than sounding like everyone else.

Canagarajah (1999) states “many periphery professionals feel compelled to spend undue time repairing their pronunciation or performing other cosmetic changes to sound native.” Their predominant concern is in effect “how can I lose my accent? “rather than “how can I be a successful teacher?” (Canagarajah 1999, quoted in McKay, 2002, p. 84-85). Jenkins (1998) goes on to discuss pronunciation teaching, “It is a current irony that although pronunciation teaching tends to be marginalized throughout the ELT world, it is non-native teachers who are generally the better versed in all these areas, and thus the better prepared to embark on teaching pronunciation for EIL” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 125).

Gilikjani (2011, p. 76) claims that some linguists support the Critical Hypothesis idea. Lenneberg (1967) argues that in order to develop a native-like pronunciation, the learners need to begin learning the language before they turn seven (cited in Gilikjani, 2001, p. 76). However, Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) claim that environment and motivation could be more important factors when learning a native-like pronunciation than age. According to their studies, even adults can become native-like speakers of a second language if they are motivated to do so (as cited in Gilikjani, 2011, p. 76). Miller (2003) states that changing or not changing ones speech patterns is affected by how much responsibility the students take, how ready the students are, and how much the students practice outside of class (cited in Gilikjani, 2011, p. 78).

Pennington and Ellis (2000) discuss some elements of intonation, such as nuclear stress, seems to be learnable, but other elements, such as pitch movement, marking boundaries and the intonation of sentence tags are not (as cited in Levis, 2005, p. 369). According to Levis (2005, p. 370), pronunciation research and pedagogy have for a long period been influenced by the following two principles: the Nativeness Principle and the Intelligibility Principle. The Nativeness principle, where it is desirable to achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language, was the dominant view in pronunciation teaching before 1960s. However, it diminished in importance when research showed that nativeness
in pronunciation appeared to be biologically conditioned to occur before adulthood. This led to the conclusion that aiming for nativeness was an unrealistic burden both for teachers and learners (Levis, 2005, p. 370).

According to Levis (2005, p. 370), the Intelligibility Principle holds that learners need to be understandable. Munro and Derwing (1999) discuss the principle and state that there is no clear correlation between accents and understanding (as cited in Levis, 2005, p. 370). Accent is, according to Levis (2005), influenced by both biological timetables and by sociolinguistic realities. Identity plays a crucial role in the choice of an accent and is perhaps as strong as biological influences, i.e. “Accent, along with other markers of dialect, is an essential marker of social belonging” (Levis, 2005, p. 375).

Furthermore, Levis (2005, p. 370), states that very few adults learning a foreign language achieve a native-like pronunciation. The motivation, amount of first language use and pronunciation training are positively correlated with more native-like pronunciation, but none of these factors seem to overcome the effects of age. However, Moyer (1999) states that the Nativeness Principle still affects pronunciation teaching in classrooms, where learners aim at affecting and changing their non-native accents (as cited in Levis, 2005, p. 370). Many teachers, moreover, may see the learner who achieves native-like accent as an ideal that is achievable instead of a rare expectation.

According to Jenkins (1998), “influences, such as the British and American media, local norms, and group identity are likely to intervene to varying degrees to prevent success among either native or non-native users of EIL.” Jenkins continues saying that “any neutral, universal forms of English pronunciation, simplified or otherwise, will therefore probably have to be unplanned, developing naturally from 'below' rather than being imposed from 'above', as seems to be happening at present, albeit on a smaller scale, among the different English accents of Singapore” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 120). Furthermore Jenkins (2000, p. 8) discusses that the users of English who interact in the inner-circle context professionally may need to adjust the inner-circle model, while English users from the outer or expanding circle could find the inner-circle model inappropriate or even unnecessary.

Levis (2005, p. 376), states “… teaching pronunciation is only partially a pedagogical decision, and that old assumptions are ill-suited to a new reality”. He also suggests that the English pronunciation has always to a large extent been determined by ideology and intuition, instead of research. For example, “Teachers have intuitively decided which features have the greatest effect on clarity and which are learnable in a classroom setting”
English accents

(Levis, 2005, p. 376). Additionally Levis (2005) claims that “if the positive aspect of identity is the desire to belong, the negative is the desire to exclude” (Levis, 2005, p. 376).

According to Jenkins (1998, p. 126), when lacking an international context for learning, the preference tends to be towards EFL rather than EIL, despite of the future uses to which the learners will put their English. She continues by stating: “in addition to reforming the pronunciation syllabus, two major tasks for EIL over the coming decades are, therefore, to reposition the crucial pedagogical area of pronunciation centre-stage rather than in the wings, and to make multilingual classes available wherever in the world English is taught and learned in order to serve as an international lingua franca” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 126).

3.2 Comprehension and pronunciation issues

In a study of English-accented German, Politzer (1978) mentions that vocabulary errors affect listening comprehension more negatively than grammar and pronunciation (as cited in Munro and Derwing, 1997, p. 288). Pronunciation is the factor that affects the least. However, another study by Fayer and Krasinski (1987) shows that nonnative patterns in pronunciation and hesitation are strong factors leading to listener distraction and annoyance (as cited in Munro and Derwing, 1997, p. 288). After surveying current research, Munro and Derwing (1997, p. 288), suggest that the effects of the second language accent on intelligibility remain unresolved. However, they claim that second language syllabus designers, instructors and writers of textbooks may feel obliged to focus their attention on accent reduction, “without regard to specific features that may interfere with intelligibility, because any accentedness is seen as a problem” (p. 288).

Munro and Derwing (1997, p. 285), discuss studies on the most important factors in intelligible pronunciation that result in different conclusions. For example, Gimson (1978) claims that an accurate production of consonants is more important to comprehension in English than native-like production of vowels (as cited in Munro and Derwing, 1997, p. 288). Schairer (1992) on the other hand comes to an opposite conclusion for English-speaking learners of Spanish. Several studies have found evidence for prosodic errors being more serious than segmental errors (as cited in Munro and Derwing, 1997 p. 289). If comprehensibility and intelligibility are the most important goals in pronunciation, then the accent of the speaker should be of minor concern. The focus should in that case not be on
global accent reduction, but only on those aspects that seem to interfere with the understanding of the listener, (Munro and Derwing, 1997 p. 305). The syllabus, Lgr11, states that the students should use language strategies to be understood and to understand spoken English (Skolverket, 2011, p. 30).

Teaching English as an EIL and ELF houses the same ideas. The core point of EIL and ELF are that students can be understood. EIL has little to no focus at all on pronunciation. The whole idea of ELF is that English is to be used as a Lingua Franca, and thus not necessarily to be spoken with a perfect accent or pronunciation. Instead, both of EIL and ELF suggest that focus should be put on general comprehension. The knowledge requirements in the syllabus and its comments clearly follow EIL and ELF. Here can be found that intelligibility, clarity and fluency are emphasized, (Skolverket, 2011, p. 22).

Munro & Derwing (1997, p. 305) discuss that an understanding of learner accents, and their effect on intelligibility, can help teachers identify characteristics of learner pronunciation. Harmer (1991, cited in Gilikjani, 2011, p. 76), points out that the primary aim is for students to be understood. A good pronunciation is needed for this, but not a perfect accent (as cited in Gilikjani, 2011, p. 76). According to O’Brien (2004, cited in Gilikjani, 2011, p. 76), teachers need to spend time teaching the students the rules for word stress, rhythm and intonation in English and the teacher should also focus on individual sounds that may be difficult for the students in class.

Elliot (1995, cited in Gilikjani 2011, p. 77), claims that teachers generally sacrifice teaching pronunciation because they view it as the least useful of the basic language skills, they spend more time on other areas of the language such as listening, speaking reading and writing. Another point of view, according to Elliot (1995), is that teachers may feel justified neglecting pronunciation because they believe that it is more difficult for an adult to attain target language pronunciation skills, or possibly, the teachers do not have the background or tools to teach pronunciation properly and therefore it is ignored, (cited in Gilikjani 2011, p. 177).

Jenkins (1998, p. 121), suggests that in order to promote intelligibility through teaching EIL, while also allowing speakers a freedom to express themselves with their own pronunciation norms, we should focus on three areas: certain segmentals (the ‘core’ sounds of English), nuclear stress and articulatory setting. Mastery of the latter will result in the core sounds and allows the speaker to affect these sounds to produce nuclear stress. Jenkins (1998, p. 125), argues that all teachers, both native and non-native, need to be well educated in the three core phonological areas; sounds, nuclear stress, and articulatory
English accents

setting. This will enable the teachers to provide the students exposure that is necessary to “points of reference and models for guidance”, thus preventing local norms from floating too far from each other and resulting in international unintelligibility (Jenkins, 1998, p. 125).

Furthermore in this article Jenkins (1998, p. 124), claims that the demands of the teachers are such that non-native teachers will still be required to speak more closely to the standard native model than their students. This prevents local norms from changing too far from the standard and thus, resulting in “international intelligibility” (Jenkins, 1998). However, “we should all guard against political correctness, in the sense of telling our learners what their goals should be: in particular that they should not want to sound like native speakers if they clearly wish to do so” (Jenkins, 1998, p. 125).

According to Crystal (2003, cited in Gilikjani 2011, p. 79), learners need to learn pronunciation along with all other aspects of language. Conversation, drilling, expert guidance and critical listening are what learners need. Pronunciation has a positive effect when learning a second language, and results in skills needed for effective communication (Crystal cited in Gilikjani, 2011, p. 74). To achieve this, Jenkins (2000, p. 14) suggests a restricted contrast, which she calls the Lingua Franca Core (LFC). Jenkins advocates that we still need a set of unifying features, which at least has the potential to ensure that pronunciation will not hinder successful communication in EIL settings (Jenkins, 2000, p. 14).

Jenkins (2000, p. 14), emphasizes that the Lingua Franca Core recounts to EIL contexts, and not to situations where communication is between native and non-native speakers of English. Dauer (2005, p. 43-50), discusses and questions some of Jenkins’ ideas regarding the LFC. Firstly, she questions the fact that Jenkins suggests that all consonants (except /θ/ and /ð/ – being replaced by [f] and [v]) are to be included. Dauer expresses disbelief on how this can help students and suggests that the sound [v] in itself is problematic for many students. Also, Dauer criticizes that vowel reduction cannot be dispensed from teaching. She states that it will not help students to speak fluently if they are forced to include every vowel when speaking. The speech flow, suggests Dauer, will be hindered, and speech may become burdensome for the student (2005).

Dalton and Seidlhofer (cited in Jenkins, 1994. P. 124), suggest that by treating RP and/or GA as a model, we use them as guidance, and therefore decide to imitate these accents more or less according to a specific situation. Instead of using native norms as the goal, teachers should be aware that this is no longer a desirable or a likely outcome. A
native model can, according to Dalton and Seidhofer (1994) be used as a reference to prevent local non-native varieties from changing too much from each other and also to improve receptive competence in the interaction with native speakers (cited in Jenkins, 1998, p. 124).

This once again ties in well with the present syllabus Lgr11. The priority is that students are at least able to express themselves simply, understandably and with (relative) ease, (p. 37). Furthermore, they need to be able to understand some varieties of spoken Englishes (p. 34). According to the syllabus, a student aiming for a higher grade needs to express herself in relatively varied ways, clearly and coherently; in addition, they need to be able to speak with ease, (Skolverket, 2011, p. 38).

### 3.3 Sociocultural factors

Peters (2004) challenges the possibility of English being neutral. He claims, “Any regional variety of English has a set of political, social, and cultural connotations attached to it, even the so-called 'standard' forms”. With Peters’ suggestion in mind, teachers need to be aware of their decisions on which material they choose to exhibit, as the syllabus clearly states, “The English language surrounds us in our daily lives and is used in such diverse areas as politics, education and economics” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 32).

According to Aidinlou and Kejal (2012, p. 139), we need to know what “socio-cultural competence” is. They state that socio-cultural factors play an incredibly important role in learning and using a new language better and easier. And if these factors are not applied when teaching a new language, negative consequences may follow, like disability in understanding very culture-dependant lessons (p. 139).

This technique exposes language learners to a new language’s culture and equips the teacher with strong social and cultural pedagogical materials. Findings indicate that understanding the social and cultural features of the target language enables the student to better perceive the new language (Aidinlou & Kejal, 2012).

Levis (2005, p. 375) discusses that inaccuracy in an accent may reflect neither lack of ability nor interest, but instead it reflects social pressure from home communities or other students. In addition speakers who are too accurate may risk being seen as disloyal to their primary ethnic group. Levis writes that, “Accent, along with other markers of dialect, is an
essential marker of social belonging” (Levis, 2005, p. 375).

Aidinlou and Kejal (p. 139) state that it should be noted that when students work on socio-cultural competence in language classes, it does not mean asking them to abandon their culture and adopt another identity. It means offering information about underlying cultural and social factors that affect discourse and communication.

Hall (2003, p. 31), claims that language use and identity are conceived differently in a sociocultural perspective on human action. Here identity is viewed as a socially formed dynamic product of the social, historical and political context of the experiences of an individual. She claims further that when we use a language, we do that as individuals with social histories. Our social histories are defined by our membership in a range of social groups into which we are born such as social, class, gender, religion and race (p. 31). In addition to the group membership into which we are born, we take over a second layer of group membership developed through our involvement in different social institutions, for example school, church, family and workplace (Hall, 2003, p. 31).

Hall (2003, p. 34) also states that it is important to remember that our perceptions and evaluations of our own and each other’s identities are attached to the groups and communities that we are members of. “In our use of language we represent a particular identity at the same time that we construct it” (Hall, 2003, p. 34). Hall further states that at any communicative moment there is a possibility to take up a “unique stance towards our own identity and those of others, and of using language in unexpected ways towards unexpected goals” (p. 35). The comments to the syllabus states: “Language is to be viewed from a social perspective – it is used and learned with other people” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 10, [our translation]).

### 3.4 The Syllabus for English

The Swedish syllabus for English (Skolverket, 2011) emphasizes that the English language has become a major tool for communication and showing cultural differences and variations are crucial when teaching English in Sweden today (p. 32). The syllabus further discusses that students need to understand some spoken regional and social variants within the English language, (Skolverket, 2011, p. 34). On another note, the syllabus suggests enriching pronunciation, intonation and fixed language expressions, (Lgr11, 2011, p. 35).
4 Method

This section describes the method used to obtain data for our results. It discusses the participants, the use of the quantitative method (questionnaire), and the schools visited for data collection.

4.1 Participants and procedure

For the purpose of this paper, questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were handed out to students at two different secondary schools (74 students in their 9th school year) and at two different upper secondary schools (82 students in their 12th year). A total of 156 students (74 male, 82 female) participated in the study.

The four different schools were located around different towns and municipalities in Skåne. One of the secondary school was located in a multilingual area, whereas the other was in an area with primarily native Swedish students (in this case with parents born and raised in Sweden). The two upper secondary schools were similar to each other, both having mostly Swedish students. The reason we chose to work with both secondary and upper secondary school students was to test for possible differences between the age groups. The students from upper secondary school came from Social Sciences Programme and Technological Programme.

The schools were selected based on convenience. Thus, we used the schools where we had contacts either via partner schools or friends working as teachers. The students were informed that the survey is anonymous, and that sending an email to us would give them the chance to read the final results if they were interested. Students who were younger than eighteen were given a letter of intent (Appendix 2) for their parents to fill allowing their child to participate. The students were informed about the purpose of the survey, and in those cases when we could not attend, the teacher handing out the questionnaires was informed and he/she could forward the relevant information to the students.
We decided to use a quantitative rather than qualitative method for this paper. The difference is that a quantitative study gives us the opportunity to compare different ideas, to form hypotheses and also to get in a larger number of answers. The qualitative method (primarily interviews), on the other hand, can give a deeper understanding of the thoughts from a small target group. With a qualitative method, a researcher can have a discussion with her subjects and therefore ask follow-up questions. Using interviews as a method, is time consuming and it can be hard to find an appropriate time for the interviews. Though we considered interviewing some students we decided to use only the quantitative method in the end. Thus, the opportunity to compare different ideas and thoughts, as well as getting a larger target group, made us decide to use a questionnaire. Another reason why we chose to use this method was that interviews are highly time-consuming and we felt that we had too little time to carry them out.

4.2 The questionnaire

The choice of a quantitative study made it possible for us to collect a large number of data within a relatively short time span. By using questionnaires, we were also able to compare results in a number of different ways. Of course, there are some obvious problems with the selection of questionnaires, and some of them became quickly apparent. One of the risks when choosing to work with questionnaires is the phenomenon of social desirability, (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister and Zechmeister, 2010 p. 159). This means that participants try to figure out (often unconsciously) what the study is about; and therefore, they answer accordingly instead of answering the way they really feel and think. To avoid this, it is crucial to construct the questionnaire in such a way that it is hard or impossible to guess the researchers’ intensions. That participants are aware of that results will be recorded in some way may thus be a factor in their answers, (Shaughnessy et al 2010, p. 159).

We chose to use a quantitative method, in order to find a pattern in the answers of the students participating. The use of a quantitative method can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, we could easily get access to attitudes and ideas from a larger group of participants within a relatively short time span. On the other hand, within the scope of this study, we could not ask follow-up questions to gain in-depth understanding of the participants’ thoughts. Furthermore, the use of a questionnaire would work as a quick and
less time consuming method for students. Students only needed about five to ten minutes to fill in the questionnaire, which made it easier for us to find appropriate times at the schools to hand out the questionnaires.

Another factor when choosing to work with questionnaires is that only participants with strong feelings about the topic answer seriously. If a participant, for example, feels strongly against accents then he/she may be inclined to speak their mind on the subject. Meanwhile, uninterested participants may be giving less priority to the questions and thus not answer as heartily. The risk is that only students with strongly positive or negative ideas on accents (in this case) answer the questions seriously, whereas less interested participants ignore open-ended questions, (Wray, Trott & Bloomer, 2006).

It is important that the questionnaire is valid and reliable. This means that it measures what we intend it to measure, and that it measures the same thing every time it is administrated. It is imperative that the questionnaire has validity and reliability if we are to discuss the results with certainty (Shaughnessy et al, 2010, p. 162). In order to find out whether the questionnaire has validity and reliability, a pre-test is needed. This test gives an indication to where possible problems and issues exist in the questionnaire. Again due to limited time, we did unfortunately not pre-test our questionnaire. In the discussion there is a section devoted to some of the consequences for this.

4.2.1 Construction of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was constructed with our research questions as a base. We wanted to create a questionnaire that was not too time consuming for the students to fill in. In some of the questions it was possible for the students to develop and specify their answers further so that we could get a deeper view on their thoughts and attitudes. From the beginning we had a third research question as well, and it was connected to question 2 where we asked what languages the students speak. We wanted to find out if there was a connection with how many languages the students speak and their attitudes towards different English accents. However, we did not use this research question since we found it too problematic to measure.

With yes and no questions we could get clear answers and by adding the opportunity to specify their answer, we could get a better understanding of the students’ thoughts. By giving multiple-choice questions the students were given more freedom than in yes or no questions. However, with these questions we were still able to grade the answers in SPSS, the statistic program used.
With the open-ended questions, the students could specify and develop their answers further. However, the last question (number 8) is an open-ended question that is not a follow-up question but stands on its own. Here we ask the students to explain how they have received their accent and, by not giving any multiple-choice answers here, we believe that we affected their answers less.

We have used open and closed questions, multiple-choice questions and the possibility to specify some of the answers given. In order to use a statistic program, some closed and multiple-choice questions were needed. However, we also wanted to go deeper into the students’ thoughts and therefore chose to use open questions as well. Since we planned to distribute the questionnaire to Russian students, we decided to use the English language. We worried at first that this choice would be problematic for younger students, but we soon noticed that this was not the case.
In this section, we present our findings in the order our hypotheses were presented in section 1.4.

5.1 Hypothesis 1: There is a general awareness of different accents, but students tend to prefer the Inner Circle accents.

Figure 1.1 General awareness of the chosen accents

The pie chart shows students’ overall answers when rating the five different accents (American, Australian, British, Indian and Irish). The results are shown in percentages and are distributed as follows: American 30%, Australian 21%, British 23%, Indian 11% and Irish 15%. According to the results, students thus are well aware of American English and British English, closely followed by Australian. In this particular study Irish and Indian is not as well known or understood by the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&quot;I speak American&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;I speak British&quot;</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AmE</td>
<td>M: 1,381 SD: 0,792</td>
<td>M: 2,715 SD: 0,887</td>
<td>M: 1,621 SD: 0,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BrE</td>
<td>M: 2,619 SD: 1,466</td>
<td>M: 1,333 SD: 0,577</td>
<td>M: 1,621 SD: 0,728</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.2 Attitude towards accent in relation to the one specified as spoken
A one-way ANOVA\(^1\), was used and showed that there was a significant difference (American, \(F=7,686, p=0,00\); British, \(F= 4,614, p= 0,004\)) between the language specified as spoken and the score given on the scale (general awareness of the accent). The test showed that the students who stated that they speak American also give AmE the best score (1). The same turned out to be the case when it came to students speaking BrE. A post-hoc Tukey test\(^2\) gave the following results: American (M= 1,381, SD= 0792), British (M= 2,715, SD= 0,887) and Other (M= 1,621, SD= 0,820) with regard to score on AmE. The same test, with regard to score on BrE, showed: American (M= 2,619, SD= 1,466), British (M= 1,333, SD= 0,577) and Other (M= 1,621, SD= 0,728). Calculated eta square was: 0,13 and 0,08 respectively (thus both showing a medium effect).

Thus, the results show that there is a difference between the different groups. It shows that, for this study, there is a shown indication that students reporting American also grade AmE highest. Meanwhile, students reporting British generally grade BrE highest.

The results further show (as discussed above) that answering any other accent then American or British also gives a completely even result (M= 1,621 for both American and British). Although this does not show any statistical significance it provides another dimension to discuss in the results.

\(^1\)ANOVA is a tool used when you want to compare the mean differences between two or more groups. A significant \(F\)-score indicates that the null hypothesis can be rejected – meaning that it proves differences between groups, (Pallant, 2010, p. 249).

\(^2\)A post-hoc test is used within ANOVA tests to find wherein the specific difference can be found. The \(F\) value thus only shows that the hypothesis can be rejected, but to find where the actual difference is we need to perform a post-hoc test, (Pallant, 2010, p. 249).
Figure 1.3 Attitude towards accent with connection to spoken

The figure shows what answers have been given with regard to the accent students think they speak with the score (0 – 5) given to different English accents. With the use of the figure, we can see that there is a connection between the accents they report as spoken with the ones they are most aware of.

Students stating that they speak American English have thus often rated American English highest (1). The same can be seen when it comes to students who say they speak British English. In addition, students who have not specified their accent clearly show an even result regarding their awareness, thus the mean scores are lower when rating.

Figure 1.4 Distribution of spoken accent, secondary versus upper secondary students

The figure above shows which accent students have reported speaking. The results clearly show that American English is the most popular accent, according to our study. British English seems to be more popular among upper secondary students. A large number of upper secondary students (33) reported that they do not think they use a specific accent.

Under the category Other every accent came that was not American or British, including when students stated that they speak a mix of the two afore stated. The only other accent reported was Australian (3 times out of 156).
5.2 Hypothesis 2: There is a difference between secondary and upper secondary students in that teacher influence is more important to the former and personal preferences to the latter.

*Figure 1.5 How students obtain their accent (if any)*

The figure specifies how students report to obtain their accent (if they had any). On the left side the answers are shown given by secondary students and on the right side, the answers given by upper secondary students. As expected, secondary students give school as a reason more often than upper secondary students. Even though upper secondary students did not answer the question as frequently as secondary students did, it seems that the main components for picking up accents are the media and other (primarily family). In hindsight, even though only some students stated “games” as their reason(s) – only the male students did so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary students</th>
<th>Upper secondary students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I watch American movies, I think I got my accent from there”</td>
<td>“Travelling in the US, I hope to move there”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Teachers taught us to talk with a British accent”</td>
<td>“Father from the UK, I got it from him”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“From my teacher(s) and school”</td>
<td>“Playing games with proper Englishmen”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I watch a lot of American movies and TV-series”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“My mother is from Britain”
“In school”
“Playing videogames”

“My grandfather is British and my grandmother American”
“Teachers… I suppose”
“It has developed over time – by travelling it has developed into this accent”

*Figure 1.6 Comments regarding how students achieved their accent.*

Figure 1.6 shows a selection of the comments made by students. Other than the comments specified here, secondary students tended to pay slightly more attention to teachers and school. As expected, upper secondary students tended to have more personal reasons for their accent (if they reported having one). The actual comments were overall similar, but secondary students gave school or parents more focus. At least two upper secondary students gave travelling, studies or future plans as a reason.

For both age groups we could see that media is important when achieving a specific accent. A majority in both categories would state that American (or British) movies and TV-series have greatly influenced the way they speak. This result tended to be both for students saying that they actually do speak a specific accent, but also for students stating that they do not.
6 Discussion

The discussion section of this essay is divided into different sections based on our hypotheses. Focus is discussed around our hypotheses since we find that they are closely connected to the research questions. In each subsection we discuss and analyze the different results we obtained. At the end of the section, we discuss the reliability of our methods as well as provide a theoretical discussion of the findings.

6.1 Hypothesis 1: There is awareness of different accents, but students tend to prefer the Inner Circle accents

As our results show, the students participating in the study have a good awareness of different accents, even though the AmE and BrE appear to be the ones the students are most aware and comfortable with. Even the accents they are quite unsure about (IrE and IndE) seem to be fairly well known. That the different accents are so well known overall may be because the media have become so influential in today’s society. Students seem to mention the media as one of their greatest influences, and this could be a factor explaining why the five accents are also so well known. As mentioned in the introduction, by watching a TV-series, such as The Simpsons, students become aware of different accents, although these are often stereotypical and exaggerated.

The importance of introducing different accents and dialects has been widely introduced in the new syllabus (Skolverket, 2011). This may explain why the students seem to be aware of different world Englishes today.

As with our claim in our first hypothesis, students seem to be aware of a number of different accents, but their first choice and biggest awareness lies within the Inner Circle accents (in this case AmE, BrE, AusE and IrE). Notable is that IrE seems to be less known, probably due to it being mixed up with other accents. Also, as noted in the introduction, textbooks tend to give less focus on Ireland (both Northern- and Republic of Ireland). The chapters that are included often introduce only one or two texts about Ireland. Thus, if a
teacher uses the textbook as a point of reference for their teaching, any possible interaction with an Irish accent comes only in the later school years (grade 8 or 9), (from Wings 2002 and A piece of cake 1999). This would explain the students’ relative unawareness of IrE. Since we, along with researchers such as Jenkins (2000) and Levis (2005), want to advocate intelligibility to be the primary focus, when and how accents are introduced does not matter. Instead, what is most important in today’s school is that students are aware of different accents, and that they can speak clearly, fluently and with ease (Skolverket, 2011).

When we compared the students’ awareness to different accent with the one they think they speak (if any), there was a difference between the cases. Most students that specified an accent would also be more aware of this specific accent than the other four. This is perhaps not very strange because if you prefer and try to speak BrE, it makes perfect sense that one would also seek situations where BrE is spoken. Humans are social creatures and tend to want to blend in with their particular group rather than stand out. For our study, if students want to speak a certain accent, we believe that one of the factors influencing their choices may be social. As Crystal (1997) discussed, there will always be a social identity involved in accents. An accent says more about us than we realize. To a native speaker, a strange or different accent may be seen as annoying and disturbing to the conversation. However, as the English as an International Language and English as a Lingua Franca (2010 and 2005) pedagogical schools tell us, English has become a global language used in communication around the world. With this knowledge, accent and pronunciation have become less important. The syllabus for English (Lgr11, Skolverket, 2011) emphasizes that as well, but we question how we are to teach English so that students speak fluently and clearly without the introduction of accent. We feel that even though teaching accents in itself is not preferable, it may be impossible to ignore it completely. Since pronunciation and intonation is still emphasized we ask ourselves which intonations patterns are to be taught.

Alongside the discussion in the paragraph above, Jenkins (2000) argues that the people with whom the learner interacts would naturally have an influence on the learner. This may explain why there is a connection between the students’ spoken accent and the rating they give the accents. If a student speaks BrE, it only makes sense that they may be interacting with British speakers and media. If a student speaks an Outer Circle accent (which is not the case in this study), perhaps one reason could be that they communicate in English with the same kind of people—those who speak this Outer Circle accent.
As figure 1.2 shows, there is a significant difference when students were asked to rate English accents, with regard to the one they report to be speaking. According to our results, there is a significant difference between the accents students in our study report speaking with the one they rate the highest. Thus, since the vast majority of students stated that they speak AmE, it is not hard to draw the conclusion that AmE is also the one rated the highest. BrE does show the same statistics, even though the result is not as poignant. Not as many students said that they speak BrE, but the results show that the connection between speaking BrE and rating it the highest is statistically significant. If a larger sample group had been used, perhaps these results would be even more significant. The reason for AmE and BrE being so often chosen could be that teachers still teach a specific accent and encourage students to speak in a certain way. This follows Jenkins’ theory from 1997 in which she found that teachers tend to pick up a different accent from the students to minimize the risk for regional differences (1997). Since the teacher has this different accent, it will be hard for a student not to pick up the same one as their teacher. At the same time, it becomes hard for a teacher to decide how much difference should be accepted, or how much they should be expected to follow the teacher’s accent.

Also, students who are unsure of their accent, or stating other than (or a mix of) AmE and BrE, seem to be aware primarily of American and British. This may have to do with a combination of school and media. The majority of texts in textbooks tend to be based on AmE and BrE (Wings, 2000 and A piece of cake, 1999). These books may indirectly promote AmE and BrE to the students who believe that these are the norm. Many times when introducing listening comprehension, we have noticed that students complain afterwards that they had problems answering questions due to their not being able to follow the “strange accent”.

Once again, as our results show, the media influences accent and general speech patterns to a large degree. Most movies and TV-series are based in America or Britain, so knowledge about these particular accents no doubt comes from there. However, basing teaching and language learning on a native norm is, according to Jenkins (1998), no longer preferable. Instead, it should be used as a guide to avoid too many regional differences. This is what the Swedish syllabus (Skolverket, 2011) is trying to work towards--that cultural understanding shall be used as a method for English language learning.

As can be seen in figure 1.4, both year 9 and year 12 students generally speak AmE. The distribution is relatively more even for year 12 students, who also claim to not speak with a specific accent much more often. Moyer (1999) states that even though the
Nativeness Principle is no longer the norm, perhaps teachers still see the native-like accent as an ideal. Perhaps this could be a reason why the majority of secondary students claim that they speak with a particular accent. These students use English primarily in school, and their teacher’s accent becomes an influence. Perhaps the word “global” in the syllabus for upper secondary school (Skoverket, 2011, p. 53) makes the teacher put less focus on a native-like accent as ideal, and thus the students do not feel they need to aim for any particular accent. Similar to Harmer’s findings (1991), it seems that students want to obtain an accent; however, this accent does not necessarily have to be a specific one, but it appears as if the students want to gain an accent generally for fluency.

6.2 Hypothesis 2: There is a difference between secondary and upper secondary students in that teacher influence is more important to the former and personal preferences to the latter

Our second hypothesis discussed how students have come to speak with a specific accent. Our results show that for both age groups the media were their primary influence factor. This follows what Jenkins found in 1998; she believed that the influence of the British and American media has grown and may intervene with developing group identity and local norms. If TV and the media in general have such an extensive influence, it only makes sense that students aim for these specific accents (as mentioned in the previous section). For this reason, the media may not only be a positive influence for students but also a hindrance for the goals of EIL and EFC. Crystal (1998) feared that something like this would happen.

If the media (today dominated by American productions) becomes such a large factor, then in the end everyone will be speaking AmE. However, Crystal continues to discuss the social and personal importance of accents that would outweigh the risk of “Americanization”. We agree with both these statements. On the one hand, AmE may indeed take over if the media has such a large influence. On the other hand, social, local and personal identity is becoming more and more important in our modern society, and therefore we do not think that there is a risk AmE (or BrE for that matter) will take over.

According to our hypothesis, secondary students gave school as their influence much more often than upper secondary students. Comments such as “all my teachers have
spoken BrE” were often combined with that particular accent. Secondary, students stating that they spoke AmE, would in almost every case also say that the media influenced them. Personal goals and plans were also more frequent for upper secondary students. Even though both secondary and upper secondary students’ answers were similar overall – future plans such as travels, studies and dreams were only reported from year 12 students. As mentioned before, we think that the Nativeness Principle (Moyer, 1999) still remains as a factor for some teachers, perhaps because they themselves often strive for a native-like accent because of their training. This may be another reason why school still has such a large influence.

Students tend to be relatively aware of how they obtain their accent; the media and school are the main reasons they mention as influential factors. Even though not every student seem to acknowledge it, the teacher’s influence remains important. A number of students wrote similar answers to the comment seen in figure 1.6 (“Teachers taught us to speak BrE [or AmE]”). Though this in itself is not a problem, it is crucial that students get the chance to build up their own accent, if they are interested in doing so. Therefore, introducing and encouraging a variety of different accents becomes important. With that being said, in the corridors we have noticed that students are very much aware of what is asked of them, and some of them probably believe that they have to sound like their teacher or their favorite TV character. Since the syllabus (Skolverket, 2011) has no more focus on accents, then teachers need to put even more focus on actively working with pronunciation and intonation instead. The question then turns towards where this focus is to be put. As mentioned, pronunciation and intonation vary to a large degree between the major Englishes. Is LFC to be followed or a major accent? Students aiming for higher-grade still need to speak clear, fluent and with ease; so students’ pronunciation, as Crystal claims (2003), is still an important part of language teaching.

The influence of family (the most frequent under the category ‘other’) appears to be high. A number of students report having relatives of some sort in the US or Britain and would therefore have a mix of AmE and BrE or be speaking any one of the mentioned due to these relations.

Finally, an interesting fact is that boys state that games have influenced their accents and taught them English. Since most games today are in English, and since you are forced to be able to read in order to progress in them, it is no surprise that games are seen as a factor when developing accent(s). Students say that they use vocal chat functions (similar to Skype) when playing online games, such as World of Warcraft or Call of Duty.
However, it may not be so evident how the chat function in games influences the general accent.

### 6.3 Method discussion

When a majority of the questionnaires had been handed out and results started to be analyzed, we noticed that a number of questions were frequently misunderstood by the target group. Some problems included that students’ misunderstood questions, that they skipped the parts when they should be writing comments to open questions, and that sometimes we were not able to be personally present while questionnaires were handed out. Some questions needed to be explained further, and for this reason, it was impossible for us to know what explanations were given when we were not present. No matter how well instructed the external adjudicators were, we could not possibly know if explanations were given to avoid possible confusion for the students.

On the fourth question (see Appendix 1) most students circled Often or Sometimes, followed by writing the comment (“I speak [listen to] English in school”). This is all good and well, but what we wanted to find out was the situations student spoke English outside of school. Therefore, these two specific questions could not be used in our data analysis.

Finally, the word *Pleasurable* used in question six created a lot of confusion for the students. When students asked, we had to explain they were to rank them after how much awareness they think they had in the particular accent. Thus, students were asked to set the number 1 on the accent they felt most aware of and 5 to the one they were the least aware of. We informed them that if they were unaware of the accent, they were to leave that accent without a number (which in our results became “0”).

To conclude, although the questionnaire caused some confusion, by explaining and clarifying for participants we helped sort out the confusing questions. Our results may be, therefore, seen as both reliable and valid to our research questions.
6.4 Discussing the theoretical background

According to Skolverket (2011), students need to learn English first as an international language and later, in the upper secondary school, as a global language. Our interpretation of these words is similar; however, the word *global* gives us the feeling of something even broader. We feel that Skolverket’s (2011) changes in the syllabus are in line with the Intelligibility principle and that it makes sense that the focus is no longer on a specific accent but on fluency and clarity. However, we agree with Jenkins (1998) that we, as teachers, need to have knowledge and be proficient in pronunciation. For example, pronouncing a word like *ice* with [z] instead of [s] may cause confusion.

According to Leith (1997), changes are not merely a communal choice but involve cultivation by an elite. We, on the other hand, state that changes in the language start from communal choice and lead to pressure changing old rules and points of views. For example, the goals in the Swedish syllabus were to speak BrE or AmE, but they changed into goals aiming at speaking English as a global language. Although the changes happened in 2000, we still noticed that our classmates not speaking BrE were considered outside the norm.

Crystal (1999) discusses the increased role of American English, and this is also something that we can clearly see in the media today, for example, many TV-series come from US. Furthermore, as seen in our research, some of the students answered that they obtained their AmE accent from movies and TV-series. We can see that AmE is the most popular accent among secondary students, and we find that the influence of AmE in media is extensive. However, we do think that other factors such as motivation, positive attitude and interest (Gilikjani, 2011) have a large affect as well. It was interesting to find that many upper secondary students do not consider themselves as speaking with a certain accent.

One of our main concerns when studying to become English teachers was our accent. In school, we were taught that we should speak English with a certain accent, and this is something that we have not perfectly achieved. Our accent is a mixture and we thought that this could be a problem. Today we claim that we do not need a “perfect accent” to teach students English; however, we emphasize the importance of teaching pronunciation, clarity and fluency. We agree with Jenkins (1998) when she suggests that in order to promote intelligibility through teaching EIL, while also allowing speakers a freedom to
express themselves with their own pronunciation norms, we should focus on three areas: certain segmentals (the ‘core’ sounds of English), nuclear stress and articulatory setting. We argue that teachers with English as their L2 have advantages through understanding the difficulties and problems that their students may have since these teachers have been through these difficulties in their language acquisition as well.

Levis (2005) discusses the Nativeness and the Intelligibility Principles. When we were taught English in school, it was according to the Nativeness Principle, but we wish that it had been more according the Intelligibility principle. Our memories from school were that, since we were unsure about our pronunciation, we were too scared to speak English in class. When we tried to speak, we were corrected and did not get the chance to work on our fluency. In Levis’ (2005) article, we can read that many teachers may see the learner who achieves a native-like accent as an ideal that is achievable instead of a rare expectation, which may put undue pressure on many teachers.

The article by Munro and Derwing (1997) discusses whether vocabulary errors affect listening comprehension more negatively than grammar and pronunciation. They found pronunciation as a factor has the smallest affect. However, they also found that non-native patterns in pronunciation and hesitation are strong factors leading to listener distraction and annoyance. We argue that pronunciation is an important factor; however, we must be careful about how we correct our students. We do not want to distract their development in their fluency. What accent they choose to speak, if they decide to choose a specific accent, is their choice, and it is not a factor that should affect their grades. However, we agree with Jenkins (2007) when she states that we must not say that the students should not want to sound like native speakers if they clearly wish to do so. We need to be able to help students with their individual goals, no matter if it is to sound like a native speaker or not.

According to Levis (2005), the identity role in an accent is perhaps as strong as biological influences. He argues that accent is an essential marker of one’s social belonging. We suggest that it is important to be aware of this and to make the students aware of this in class as well. We want to teach the students to accept different accents and teach them that one accent is not better than another one. We want to open their eyes for other accents than the media shows, not in order to change their accents, but to broaden their knowledge and views and acceptance.
6.6 Further research

It would be interesting to replicate this research with more participants and also to make it a longitudinal one, where the same students are followed from their years in secondary school through upper secondary school. With longitudinal research it would be feasible to see possible changes in students’ attitudes, instead of comparing different individual attitudes. It would also be interesting to do qualitative research as well, where students are interviewed in order to gain a deeper knowledge of their attitudes and thoughts.

It would also be of interest to find out whether the students’ attitudes will change in adulthood. For those who show changes in their attitudes or/and accents, it could be interesting to find out why this happened. For those who had no changes, what is the reason for this?

With this research we have focused on students’ attitudes. We would like to see research made on teachers’ attitudes as well. Do they prefer that their students speak a certain accent or do they feel comfortable with the new syllabus where a specific accent no longer is required?
7 Conclusion

In this degree paper we have investigated some 9th grade and upper secondary students’ attitudes and awareness towards different English accents. The goal was to gain understanding of the students’ view of accents. We also aimed to discuss some of the reasons students of English have for obtaining accents.

Accents have always been an important social and regional factor for native speakers, and in previous years we were expected to speak AmE or BrE when studying the language in school. Today, however, the general pedagogical view of teaching English has changed drastically. Little focus today is being put on speaking any particular accent.

The results of this study have showed an indication that accent still plays a role for students in the chosen Swedish schools. Even though the focus for students no longer falls on AmE or BrE, it seems that many students still believe that they should be speaking the same accent as their teacher. Individual accents are still present, especially with older students, and they seem to be based on future plans and travels.

In general, probably due to the media, AmE is very well known to students, in this study. It would seem that watching movies and TV plays a role for obtaining and speaking with a particular accent. It appears that BrE is still, as mentioned above, indirectly being taught in school and because of that a number of the responding students want to speak with this accent. Students show awareness of the study’s accents and there seems to be a generally positive view of mixed and varied accents.

As future teachers, we believe that it is important to always keep in mind the ever-occurring changes in the English language, but also to keep well informed about current studies as to how to best teach English. By doing this, our job becomes easier and we think that it is imperative to introduce a varied accentual and dialectal picture of English.

We must ask ourselves how we are to provide this varied picture without at the same time putting too much focus on accents entirely. Even though accent in school today is not required for students’ learning, it is important to introduce them to the students. That being said, with Skolverket’s changes we are on the right track, primarily because our “forced-upon” accents have haunted us in school. The focus should be on English pronunciation and teaching, not on the particular accent the student speaks. A student
English accents speaking BrE should not get a higher grade than someone speaking AusE or a mixture of accents. Intonation and pronunciation is still discussed in the syllabus, creating the question which pattern is to be encouraged. We find it slightly confusing since intonation and pronunciation are so different between accents.

When looking at the overall results, we can understand that the phenomenon of accent seems not to be an issue for students. Generally, the accent they speak appears to be much less of a factor when comparing to our experiences in school. Still, they seem to be aware of the existence of accents. Meanwhile, accents continue to play an important role for teachers. This seems to be a combination of a general feeling of being able to teach students and as a necessity to avoid the occurrence of regional differences. Thus, the accentual phenomenon continues to matter for teachers but has nearly disappeared for students.

Finally, the prominence of the English language grows every day, becoming more and more important to our global community. Although accents are no longer important on paper, they always have been, and will be in the future, an important part of the language, especially for native-speakers of English (primarily as a social factor). Accent also seems to be important for non-native speakers in that they want to show their origin and belonging. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between accent and pronunciation. Connected speech is important, along with fluency, intelligibility and comprehension. The goal is to create a confident speaker of English. A student should be able to clarify if misunderstood.
References


Attachment 1: Questionnaire: English accents

Hello! My name is ________________ and I am writing my Degree Paper on attitudes on English accents. First I would like to thank you for participating in my research. I would also like to clarify the difference between accent and dialect. Dialect covers the grammar, words and pronunciation, while accent covers the pronunciation only. In my study, I am not concerned with the features of pronunciation that stem from your mother tongue. This questionnaire is anonymous, but if you would like to find out the final results, or if you have any questions, please email me on: sonjaskibdahl@yahoo.com.

Gender: ________________________

Age: 15-19 ______ 20-25 _______ 26-30 31 -- ______

1. What and where are you studying?

__________________________________________________________

2. What languages do you speak?

__________________________________________________________

3. Is your aim to sound in a certain way in English?

Yes ______ No ______

Please specify what accent you aim for.

__________________________________________________________
4. Please circle the answer that is correct about you and give an example.

4a) I speak English
   Never
   Often
   Sometimes

4b) I listen to English
   Often
   Sometimes
   Never

6. Do you find some of these accents more pleasurable than others? If yes, please rank the different accents by numbers.

   1 = Most pleasurable  5 = Least pleasurable
   Please feel free to add accents or comments in the end.

   Australian _____ American _____ Irish _____ British _____ Indian ______

7. Do you speak a particular accent yourself (e.g. one of the above)?

8. How did you get your accent?

Thank you for your participation.
Blankett för godkännande av undersökning, personer under 18 år

Hej målsman,

Vi heter Henrik Svensäter och Sonja Skibdahl. Vi läser på Lärarprogrammet vid Malmö Högskola, med inriktning Engelska och Lärande.
Nu när vi ska skriva examensarbete behöver vi “låna” Ert barn för vår undersökning.

Vårt arbete handlar om vilka åsikter och attityder elever har kring olika engelska accenter (e.g. Amerikansk engelska, Brittisk engelska, Australiensisk engelska, etc).
Vi kommer att dela ut en enkät på två sidor med diverse frågor rörande ämnet. Enkäten är naturligtvis helt anonym och det kommer inte att gå att spåra resultaten tillbaka till Ert barn (ifall inte så, av någon anledning, skulle önskas). Frågorna är noggrant skrivna så att de inte kräver intima eller känsliga uppgifter.

Vi behöver dock Ert godkännande för att få genomföra en undersökning på minderåriga barn. Kryssa i rutan och signera så att vi vet att ni godkänner vår undersökning.

Jag godkänner att mitt barn deltar i undersökningen ☐

______________________________
Målsmans underskrift

Tack för ert samarbete.
Vill ni veta mer om vårt arbete är Ni välkomna skicka ett mail till:
henrik.svensater@gmail.com