What happens when Russian and Swedish student teachers of language observe the same classroom practices? Do they make similar or different observations and draw similar conclusions? Will their explanations be grounded in shared beliefs about language teaching or will differences in traditions and ideals be revealed?

In this Educational report you can read about a two-year intercultural project involving students and faculty members from the State University of Saint Petersburg and Malmö University.
Observing language teaching practices in Saint Petersburg and Malmö

A two-year intercultural project involving students and faculty members from the State University of Saint Petersburg and Malmö University

Edited by Bo Lundahl

Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, 2013
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Foreword

This volume of Educational reports (Rapporter om utbildning) relates experiences and results of a more than two-year long collaboration between students and lecturers from Saint Petersburg State University and Malmö University in the area of language didactics. As much as internationalisation should be a priority and function as an integral part of a university’s mission, long-term cooperation involving both students and professors requires dedication and mutual respect by all involved, and the texts that follow will offer many examples of these qualities. Since international projects involving mobility cost money, they also require support from external sponsors and local administrative and academic leadership. It follows that the project described in these pages would not have been possible without the generous support of the Swedish Institute through its Visby programme. Heartfelt thanks are also due to Professor Johan Elmfeldt, Professor Galina A. Baeva, Associate professor Pär Widén, and Mrs Anna Åkesson. Very special thanks go to all the Russian and Swedish students who participated in the project. Your enthusiasm and commitment are worth nothing but praise. Our gratitude is also extended to the Russian and Swedish teachers and principals who so generously welcomed us to their classes and schools.

Bo Lundahl
Project leader
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Daria Semenova
Evstolia Sivas
Ekaterina Tremasova
Olga Tretyakova
Kseniia Zaretskaia
Anna Zvereva
Schools visited

Malmö
Dammfriskolan (secondary school)
Komvux Malmö Södervärn (adult education centre)
Slottsstadens skola (secondary school)
Pauli gymnasium (upper secondary school)
Kunskapssgymnasiet (upper secondary school)

Saint Petersburg
School # 4 specialized in French
School #27 specialised in literature, history, foreign languages
Gymnasium # 2
Gymnasium # 11 specialised in English
The Academic Gymnasium of the University of Saint-Petersburg
1 Introduction

Bo Lundahl
Associate professor of English with a focus on Educational linguistics at the Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University

The internationalisation project described in this volume of Educational reports came into being almost by chance. In the autumn of 2009, Sergey Ivanov from the Faculty of Philology at State University of Saint Petersburg, studied Swedish in Malmö on exchange. Sergey contacted me in my role as international coordinator at the Faculty of Education about the possibility of cooperation between our two universities. Sergey being a language student, suggested that language education would be the focus area. Around the same time I received an e-mail from the Swedish Institute announcing the possibility of applying for travel stipends with the end of supporting forms of cooperation between Swedish universities and countries in Eastern Europe, particularly around the Baltic Sea.

Once the idea of an international project had been planted, I started thinking about its possible focus and on principles to base it on. As for the latter, it would first make sense to have a project functioning as an integrated part of teacher education and involve students as well as professors. Second, the project would get added value if it were to have as broad a base as possible, and this suggested involving not only my own subject of English. Swedish could perhaps also be
included. Third, it would be ideal if what we did could develop over time, especially if the students participating could be involved over a full academic year. Fourth, it would make sense for the students to have as active a role as possible, e.g. in investigating something in collaboration with Russian students. A research-oriented approach suggested that we would target students at the advanced level. Fifth, as much as we wanted an international project to include mobility, it would have more continuity and depth if we could use an electronic platform. Sixth, my experiences of international projects had shown me that there is always something special about being able to visit schools and experience classroom practices. It would therefore make sense to focus on something related to learning and teaching. Seventh, whatever we were to do would have to be built on reciprocity and the idea of mutual gain. Any project proposal could therefore only develop fully if it were to engage representatives of both universities based on trust and a sense of real possibilities.

The principles mentioned above formed the starting points for discussions between Sergey, I and the former Head of the Department of Culture, Languages, Media, Dr Lotta Bergman. The project idea developed in these discussions was seemingly simple: Language education is based on beliefs and traditions that have evolved over time. Beliefs about language development can be related to different theories which in teacher education need to connect to learning and teaching practices through a set of principles, but as much as teacher education requires that beliefs, theories and principles are made explicit in connection to teaching practices, everything a teacher does in the name of language development cannot draw on theories. A large part of a teacher’s knowledge has to be internalised. It is thus implicit and tacit. But what were to happen if Russian and Swedish student teachers of languages were to observe the same classroom practices? What would they see and why? What would they make of their observations, and how would they explain them? To what extent would they make similar or different observations and draw similar conclusions, and to what
extent would their explanations be grounded in shared beliefs about language teaching and language development, or would differences in traditions and ideals come to the fore, for example in students’ views about communication, the nature of language, and the relationship between communicative content and form?

Based on these preliminary ideas, Lotta Bergman and Bo Lundahl applied for stipends from the Swedish Institute and consequently received funding. As a result, our first visit in Saint Petersburg was in June 2010, and we were received with open arms. During the four intensive days that we spent at the university and in the city, we managed to develop our thoughts into the skeleton of a project plan. From the Russian side, the key persons at this point were Associate professor Larissa Alekseyeva and Sergey Ivanov.

As part of our work we formulated a preliminary title, Language Acquisition Theories and Language teaching Practices: Russian and Swedish Student Teachers’ Connections Between Language Teaching Practices and Theories. We also identified the following short-term goals concerning the participating students and professors:

- Increased knowledge and understanding of similarities as well as differences between the two educational systems and cultural contexts
- Increased understanding of the background to and similarities and differences regarding views of language development and language teaching as well as understanding of factors that play a role for the development of different points of view.

Based on the Swedish Institute guidelines for international projects, we knew that we could work over a two-year period. As a consequence, we wanted to go for two student cohorts, each comprising 8 students from each faculty.
**The project plan and the time line**

The concrete work on a project plan started soon after our return to Sweden, and some very extensive work involving both sides followed. As part of the project proposal, we developed a time line, and in looking back on the project, it turned out to be realistic and therefore attainable. The time line for the project as it occurred was as follows:

<table>
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<th>Date</th>
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<td>September 2011</td>
<td>Recruitment of students</td>
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<td>September 2011</td>
<td>The establishment of an electronic platform (Moodle, to be run by the Russian colleagues)</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 2011</td>
<td>Web-based work: introductions, expectations, experiences of Language learning and teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>October 30–November 5 2011</td>
<td>First project week: 8 Russian Students and 2 faculty members in Malmö</td>
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<tr>
<td>November–December 2011</td>
<td>Follow-up in terms of outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>February–March 2012</td>
<td>The creation of the second Electronic structure; preparations for the second round of mobility</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2012</td>
<td>The launch of the second Electronic site and continued online work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13–19 2012</td>
<td>7 Swedish students and 3 professors as well as the Dean of the Faculty of Education and the Head of the Department of Culture, languages, Media in Saint Petersburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May–June 2012</td>
<td>Following up on the project week</td>
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The rest of the project period followed the same pattern but the mobility took place as follows:
November 18–25 2012  8 Russian students and 2 professors in Malmö
May 13–19 2013  6 Swedish students and 2 professors in Saint Petersburg

The time line only hints at all the work involved in planning and monitoring the virtual periods and preparing, organising and carrying out the project weeks. In international educational cooperation, project weeks are often called intensive weeks, and in our case that label was more than justified. However, since the organisation of the project weeks provided plenty of scope for student initiative, there was considerable and positive student engagement as well as a sense of excitement, not least since meanings were negotiated and friendships formed.

Capturing the process

Throughout the project period, we evaluated the different phases as well as used different prompts to encourage the voicing of reflections on the shared experiences. One set of prompts used to capture some of the process was based on the following sequence of instructions:

1. Collecting
Give examples of situations in connection to meeting your fellow students from Malmö/St Petersburg that you had not experienced before, and how you dealt with them. Give examples of situations where you had to find ways of solving problems. Consider also how intercultural encounters inevitably mean negotiations of different kinds, and how you experienced your part in those negotiations.

2. Comparing
Give examples of different kinds of educational similarities and differences between Malmö and St Petersburg at the school level – and to the extent that you feel that you can make any such comparisons – at the university level. At the school level, try
to look at the school as well as the classroom, and teaching and learning as well as relational aspects. What do you make of these similarities and differences? How do you feel about them?

3. Concluding

Sum up your experiences of the project by looking at different aspects, e.g. visiting a city/country for the first time, meeting university students and professors from another country, working in groups, visiting schools, observing classroom practices and language education. What do you feel that you have learned from participating in the project? Give examples of learning (experiences, insights, thoughts, etc.) that you would like to apply to your own life/work after the return to your home country.

The prompts are included here since some of the texts that follow are based on these prompts.

Content-wise, the texts had to be written according to the following guidelines:

Choose a perspective that relates to our project, for instance teacher-student interaction, cross-cultural interaction, asking questions in classroom setting, classroom observations in Russia and Sweden. There are of course many other options. You may e.g. also go for something that occurred in connection to the social program. Describe, discuss and reflect on the perspective you have chosen. The style should be journalistic rather than academic. There is no need for any textual references.

The texts found in this volume of *Educational reports* are primarily aimed at university students and teachers and others interested in comparative and international education.
2 Theoretical underpinnings and ideals

Sweden

Lotta Bergman and Bo Lundahl
Lotta Bergman is Associate professor of Swedish at the
Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University

In their education students should develop insights into language as a key tool for knowledge, learning and thinking. With the focus placed on language as a communicative tool in various contexts, questions are raised about what it means to master a language and what is specific for Swedish.

The theoretical foundation of teacher education is found in socio-cultural theories of language and communication where speech acts are viewed as situated in social, cultural and historical contexts. The theoretical foundations are mainly obtained from Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin. Vygotsky’s view of the close relationship between language, knowledge and personal development permeate the education as well as his theories about the relationship between language and thinking where language and communication are seen as fundamental for learning and thinking.

Bakhtin’s claims that all communication is fundamentally dialogic and that understanding and meaning arise in interaction with others have also left their mark. Creative encounters with texts and active
participation in dialogue with others are thus regarded as important prerequisites for language development and learning. In Scandinavian research on the significance of dialogue for interaction, language development and learning (e.g. Dysthe, 1995, 2001), Bakhtin’s conceptualization of polyphony is transferred to an educational context. The basic idea is that differences in the diversity of voices, languages and speech genres that students and teachers carry with them into the classroom, can be used constructively to promote development and learning. In culturally diverse schools (because of gender, class and ethnicity), teachers are confronted by many different ways of looking at the world. This requires insights into the relationship between language and the surrounding world, including beliefs, values and ideals.

Some psycholinguistic theories are in tune with socio-cultural theories. Inspiration can therefore also be drawn from genre pedagogy and interactive didactics developed in Australia and Canada to promote second-language learners’ language and knowledge (see e.g. Martin & Rose 2008, Cummins 2000).

As for English, there is a need to complement the account given above in different ways. Language teaching exists as part of a language-driven model where the goals are action-oriented and consequently may be described through what language learners are able to do with language as a tool. The ideals can be found in the intersection between implicit and explicit thought processes and between the view of language development as an individual or social process. An interest in strategies, learner and language awareness and noticing forms part of the cognitive orientation where explicit teaching plays an important part, while relational aspects, cooperation and a sense of participation are parts of a social orientation. Either way, communicative competence is a fundamental concept. Consequently, it is very important for future teachers of English to know about what it means to have all-round communicative skills. A lot of the research on this has been carried out by teams of researchers working for the Council of Europe.
Russia

Sergey Ivanov

Former lecturer in English and Swedish at the Faculty of Philology, St. Petersburg State University currently pursuing a PhD in Language Teaching and Learning at the Faculty of Arts, Umeå University.

The cornerstone of the Russian language teaching model is the concept of *Speech Activity* (a rough translation of the Russian *Rechevaya deyatel’nost’*)\(^1\) which is assumed to be similar to any kind of human activity. Thus there should be a need that precedes any speech activity. The subconscious need of a person provides a motive for activity either in reading, writing, listening, or speaking. Furthermore, speech activity, as all other activities, has three phases: planning, performing, and result. This approach to language development presupposes at least three main principles of teaching foreign languages:

1) Communicative-oriented language teaching, the result of which is that learners have developed a minimum of skills necessary to use a foreign language as a means of communication

2) Learning of foreign languages should be conscious. In language teaching it results in the principle of taking into account the peculiarities of the native language to create conditions for positive transfer and avoid negative transfer.

3) The necessity of practising through exercises at all levels of language proficiency (Presentation-**Practicing**-Performing)

These main principles are accompanied by five specific ones:

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\(^1\) By *Speech Activity* we mean here reading, listening, writing, and speaking taken as a whole. They constitute so called four types of speech activity. Some theorists claim that translation/interpretation is the fifth one but most language teaching researchers regard it as a complex type rather than an independent one.
1) Language teaching based on speech patterns

2) Combination of practicing and performing

3) Coordination of skill development in all four types of speech activity, i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking

4) Oral types of speech activity (listening and speaking) precede written ones (reading and writing)

5) Approximation, especially in pronunciation (refraining from correcting mistakes immediately that do not affect communication and comprehension)

Finally, the current model of teaching strives to be student-oriented which is why the process of learning should be differentiated in order to meet every single student’s expectations and develop their abilities and skills.
3 A Russian perspective

Yulia Sedelkina
Associate Professor of the Department of Foreign Languages and Lingua-didactics at the State University of Saint-Petersburg, responsible for School Teacher Training of 4th year students of Faculty of Philology

The project focused on students’ and lecturers’ beliefs, ideals and thoughts concerning language learning and teaching as well as the relationship between beliefs and ideals and teaching practices. It aimed at providing students with the possibility for researching, understanding and critically evaluating the theories and practices that shape language education in Russia and Sweden.

When I joined the project in spring 2012 it was in the middle of its course. My colleague, associate professor Larissa Alekseyeva, who coordinated it at that time, asked me to negotiate the possible school visits for the groups of Russian and Swedish students. Since I had been in charge of teaching practice at the Faculty of Philology for almost 10 years the problem was not to provide school visits, but to find the schools best suited to the needs of the project.

As the main focus of observations was describing and comparing educational processes, I decided to choose three as different schools as possible – a historical gymnasium in the city centre, which is the oldest school in Russia, a contemporary school specialised in literature and
languages, which is a typical Russian state school, and the Academic Gymnasium, which is a University preparatory department for talented children from all over the country. This provided observations of not only various teaching styles and approaches but also contrasting school environments.

I also kept in mind the necessity of presenting Russian culture and traditions to Swedish students, so that they could notice the national influence on the educational institutions and compare it with that of Swedish culture and traditions to find familiarity between them which could result in possible summing up and establishing general statements valid in both countries. The chosen schools met this need perfectly - they were all typically Russian, but represented three fairly opposite educational perspectives.

Finally, it was important to highlight the relationship between education and society - almost the only one remained close to that of Soviet-era level, as general secondary education in Russia is still tuition-free. Nevertheless, the three schools reflected connections with various social groups - from a new class of wealthy Russians, who can pay for the education of their children, to the vast majority who have to rely on the government.

Having obtained the agreements from the schools I made sure everything was prepared and organised properly for the spring week. The main goals were to let the students learn:

- to collaborate effectively in foreign cultural environment (particularly Russian at that point) while visiting schools and observing lessons or doing the task analysing the collected data and presenting the results;
- to communicate with team-partners and faculty in a foreign language (English is foreign for all the members) socialising in academic, professional, and personal realms;
• to identify, analyse, and critically reflect on particular theoretical phenomena observed in a real classroom considering how these phenomena are locally situated within a global context to understand broader, global trends in educational policy and practice;

• to be sensitive to a foreign culture to respect it appropriately both in and out of classroom.

Needless to say, “education” is bigger than the phenomena of teaching and learning observed in the classroom. It includes political, economic, sociological, historical, psychological, and other phenomena as well that influence educational systems, processes, or outcomes. That is why the equal part of the project was devoted to introducing Swedish students to Russian culture – luckily, Saint-Petersburg provides infinite possibilities for this.

The groups’ presentations and reports, that summarised the more than intensive work during that week, proved that the idea of comparing and contrasting national educational systems and views on ELT in Russia and Sweden had been worthwhile.

The following academic year, I was in charge of coordinating the project from the side of Saint Petersburg State University. This time we recruited the students with two different specialities: “The Theory and Practice of Intercultural Communication” and “The Theory and Methodology of Teaching Foreign Languages and Cultures”. The criteria for the selection of students were their academic merits, proficiency in English, interest in international education and intercultural cooperation, and their ability to act as an ambassador for their respective departments and universities. The focus of the work was the same as the previous year, but more precise in terms of the subject of observations and closer connections between the virtual periods and the following intensive weeks in autumn 2012 and spring 2013. The range of schools was also wider to provide a broader educational context and social environment.
The collaborative work resulted in presentations and reports each of which was strikingly authentic, well-thought-out, bridging theory and practice. They showed that the project reached its goal successfully – the students managed to learn enough to compare language teaching in Russian and Swedish educational systems.

Needless to say, more issues, such as cultural processes, democratization, globalization, economic development and political conflicts, could be taken into account while examining language education in a national context. However, this needs more time and work, probably in a longer-term collaborative research that would involve both students and faculty, and could be a further development of the project.

*Travelling by underground in Saint Petersburg.*
4 A Swedish perspective

Marie Thavenius
Associate professor with a focus on literature and media studies at the Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University

The long title of the project, Language Acquisition Theories and Language Teaching Practices: Russian and Swedish student teachers’ Connections Between Language Teaching Practices and Theory, says something about at least three positive aspects of this project. The first aspect is that teachers and students participated together. As a teacher I had the chance to discuss what we saw and experienced at schools, at the university and in St Petersburg as a whole with my Swedish colleagues, with the Russian colleagues and with both Swedish and Russian students. I am convinced that this gave me a more complex picture of both Russian and Swedish language education than if the project had been for teachers only. I also like the idea of teachers and students being in situations where we can learn together and from each other. Of course that is the case also in regular educational situations but then we are often caught in a traditional way of thinking about students as learners.

The second positive aspect – also present in the title of the project – is that it was a project about language acquisition theory and language teaching practices, so in Malmö students with English or Swedish as their major subject could participate. That means that the students
from Malmö studying at the same department could come together and compare their courses and contribute in different ways. Of course it is not necessary to participate in an exchange program with St Petersburg to be able to meet and exchange experiences, but I think that in this case we could, so to speak, double the effect. The students could exchange experiences with both students from their own department and students from another country and it probably gave them a more multifaceted picture of language teaching in both Sweden and Russia.

The third positive aspect that the title focuses upon concerns the connections between theory and practice. In this project the students were expected to discuss language acquisition theories, make observations schedules and visit schools. During the school visits they mostly observed lessons in English. In Malmö some of the lessons were Swedish lessons and the Russian students then observed what they could see and understand when they did not understand the language. The students did the observations in groups of four (two Russian and two Swedish students in each group). After the observations they discussed what they had seen and compared their observations. Then they used language acquisition theories to analyse what they had seen and made a presentation about it. It was very interesting to listen to and discuss these presentations. The connections between theories and practices were very present here. It was obvious that the students had to articulate what theories they had come across and then let these theories help them in what to look for during the lessons. After the lessons they also used theories to analyse what they had seen and what they had observed and experienced then led to further discussions of the theories. Consequently, the students had real opportunities to let theories and practices work together in developing their understanding of language education.

My colleagues and I participated in the school visits, discussed the lessons informally with the students afterwards and listened to their presentations. We do not know much about the negotiations that took place in the student groups, but they had to negotiate when to
decide what theories they were going to use, when they were going to make the observation schedules, and when they were analysing the observations. Perhaps they were really negotiating or perhaps one or two people in the group made most of the decisions because they knew more about these things than the others. It is also likely that there were more negotiations when we met in St Petersburg because they had already been together for one week in Malmö and knew each other better then and did not feel that they had to be so polite. What is certain is that they all learnt something from each other as a consequence of working together.

When you take part in an exchange program like this it is inevitable that you compare the Russian and the Swedish school systems, language teaching practices at schools and at the university level. That is naturally one of the main reasons for having projects like this, but it is also a problem as we see only a small part of this, a few lessons, and it is also important to remember that we see things from our own perspective. Even if we try to be open-minded it is hard to know if we see what we expect to see. I know that we all saw both similarities and differences concerning language education in the two countries, but it is difficult to know if we focused mostly on similarities or mostly on differences.

When I look back at the schools and lessons I visited in St Petersburg my main impression is that these lessons could all have taken place in Sweden. Of course there were differences, compared to Swedish schools, such as school uniforms and a more authoritative teaching at some schools, but the content and organization of the lessons could have been the same in a Swedish school. That does not mean that the lessons we observed in St Petersburg were very much the same. They were different – as lessons at different schools, in different classes, with different teachers are different in Sweden. This is perhaps not so surprising, but it is nevertheless important to remember that the differences are probably more significant within the countries than between them.
In conclusion, I would like to offer some impressions from two English lessons I visited in St Petersburg. These two lessons were at different schools and one class consisted of eight-year-old pupils and the other was a group of seventeen-year-old pupils. Both teachers in these two different classes smiled and joked a lot. They seemed to really like their students and they talked and read about content matter that was interesting and true for the two groups of learners. They seemed really interested in what their pupils were saying and in helping them to express what they wanted to say. When they talked about grammar it was in a context where their students needed that knowledge to make themselves understood. These teachers’ teaching is what good language teaching is about – in Russia and in Sweden.
5 Developing professional competence

Larissa Alekseyeva
Associate professor Larissa Alekseyeva specialises in TEFL and LSP methodology for MA and post-graduate students at the Faculty of Philology, St. Petersburg State University.

The teaching profession is becoming more and more complex and multifaceted. Therefore the process of personnel training should take the shape of coherent and combined system of academic knowledge and practical experience accumulation. The latest publications in Russian academic journals pose a question if introducing innovations into the teacher-training process is possible from inside of the individual. This problem arises from the inability of traditional pedagogic systems to function as efficiently as they used to in the past; from the necessity of new pedagogic systems to replace the old ones; from the new educational approaches that demand highly skilled specialists to build up their own trajectory of professional self-development.

The inner professional development concept is being reflected in the arrangement, planning and realization of the international project described in this report.

The underlying principle of the collective educational and research process during the project is based on methods of active learning derived from a learner-centered approach to teaching. Learning starts
from exchanging one’s own experiences and knowledge when the participants analyse similarities, pose questions, work out a plan of actions, etc. Further, they are supposed to get fresh information from recent resources and apply it to practical skills new for them. To our regret the time frame and the project organizational framework did not allow the participants to put into practise what they had just acquired and mastered (e.g. to provide opportunities for Russian students to teach a lesson, or part of a lesson, in a Swedish school and for Swedish students – in Russian schools). However, during all stages of the project two main requisites of the active learning methods were observed: a). feedback provided by the facilitators in a constructive way and supporting the students rather than discouraging them and b). the principle of collective responsibility for the process of learning. It was also important for the project organizers that another condition was met – the principle of cyclicity in planning of theoretical and practical sequences. This principle forwarded the implication of the professional tasks’ method (see below).

One of the aims of the Swedish-Russian project is developing professional competence of the future educational specialists, i.e. preparing them for practical activity. The teachers-to-be need to be thoroughly instructed in terms of specific skills they will need to teach a foreign language well. These specific skills include social and psychological adaptability; communicative competence; knowledge of the subject matter; pedagogical and methodological experience; self-realization and drive for continuous professional development.

The process of forming and developing professional competence can be realized on the basis of modified teaching/learning models. It is generally known that teaching methods are integrated according to the three main traditions:

a. teaching through passing on one’s knowledge (empirical)
b. teaching through training (behaviorist)
c. teaching through constructing knowledge and acquiring experience (constructivist).

The teaching/learning model focusing on professional competence development requires moving from constructivism to contextual or cooperative learning, which can metaphorically be described as “learning in collaboration, learning as the student’s progress support”. This was the primary pedagogical idea assumed as the basis for initiating the project.

The problem of step-by-step professional competence development has recently become the core goal of all pedagogic systems. In this connection in the professional education content a method of professional tasks has been introduced. A professional task is a system of multilevel activities related to real-life professional situations. The main aim of a professional task is to suggest opportunities for students to apply their theoretical knowledge to the concrete circumstances in the target specialist sphere, to take reasonable decisions and to draw sound conclusions. Educationalists assume that while resolving professional tasks students start to realize their inner need for professional development.

As part of the project we identified some differences in the two educational systems. The language of instruction in Swedish universities (at the Masters’ level) is English, while in Russia the mother-tongue is still in wide use at all levels of education. Swedish students are generally older than the Russian ones which has a positive impact on their motivation, maturity and responsibility. As opposed to Russian universities the student attendance looked very high. We also noticed a considerable divergence in universities’ curricula as well as in the systematic approach to assessment and control (e.g. in Swedish universities tests are in most cases written; oral tests may have the form of group presentations; tests are conducted in the middle of the term). To our surprise the expected student dropout is rather high (in some
fields it can reach as much as 50%). A substantial amount of hours spent on “teaching / pedagogic practice” (as it is called in Russia) either in the form of observation school visits or real teaching was a nice surprise.

Ministries of Education in many countries have become aware of the need to update national curricula, syllabi, local educational environments, pedagogic systems, etc. Scientific, research and practical cooperation between universities within the framework of international innovative projects is part of a very important tendency to guarantee graduates high competitiveness and successful careers. Initiating multicultural programs and programs that develop life skills and career skills is being discussed in European educational academic journals as a burning issue. The Russian-Swedish international project Language Acquisition Theories and Language Teaching Practices: Russian and Swedish student teachers’ connections between language teaching practices and theory sets this problem and successfully resolves it.
6 To Russia with Love

Pär Widén

Associate professor and Head of department at the Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University.

This international mobility project between an old well-established university in Russia and our 15-year-young university in Malmö turned out very successfully, and the studies in the humanities in combination with language and culture studies within subjects like Swedish, Swedish as a second language, and English helped us to find the potential to add intercultural and international perspectives to teacher education. The multilingual approach and multi-subject collaboration between the staff was part of this added value.

Internationalisation is a crucial aspect within all curricula and policies of our teacher education. This collaboration project made it possible for teacher educators and teacher students from different knowledge disciplines to collectively take part in this joint venture. This certainly deepened the quality of the courses that we offered within this exchange as well as the quality of language teacher education at Malmö University as a whole. Having students and staff experiencing a completely different learning setting and as a consequence having to adapt to new learning cultures, truly furthered the language learning process and our thoughts on language acquisition.
From the perspective as an employer and as head of department at Malmö University, this also widened the learning scope within the department’s teaching staff and knitted the different academic disciplines closer together. This new way of collaborating was made possible both within and outside of the department, at our faculty and with partners outside the University. We truly learned from this exchange project with Russia and Saint Petersburg, and we hope that we can find forms of continuing our cooperation.
The initial stage of the project was based on the use of Moodle, a software e-learning platform. Moodle enabled us to accomplish the tasks of the initial stage yet at the same time made us face a number of challenges.

Moodle was mainly used twice: at the beginning of the autumn phase before the visit of Russian students and professors to Sweden and at the beginning of the spring phase before the return visit of Swedish students and professors to Russia. In autumn, during the first virtual period, the Swedish and Russian students and professors introduced themselves, formed study teams, and discussed differences and similarities of the Swedish and Russian education systems. The second virtual period, which took place in spring, included a series of assignments based on videos of EFL classes that let the students focus on language practicalities.

Moodle provides a wide range of different study tools, such as Chat, Database, Forum, Glossary, Quiz, Survey, Wiki, for organizing various
types of activities. However, this time the work in Moodle was built around the forum. The following types of forums were used:

1. News forum (for posting announcements about the beginning and the end of the virtual periods; for sending notifications about adding new assignments to the main page of the project; for placing feedback on the completed assignments; for sending notifications concerning the visits; for exchanging letters of thanks and other information at the end of the project).
2. Introduction forum (for posting photos and brief self-descriptions for the purpose of getting to know each other).
3. Discussion forum (for posting assignments and participating in discussions).

In autumn, there were four discussion forums for the participants to talk about differences and similarities of the education systems in Sweden and Russia. The students were asked 1) to work in groups and write questions to one another concerning the Swedish and Russian education systems (secondary education, upper secondary education); then to work in two groups (Swedish and Russian) and answer the questions that they received from another group; 2) to work in groups and discuss features of Swedish/Russian education system that they find particularly important to understand for somebody visiting Sweden/Russian; then to discuss the features that the other group posted; 3) to work in groups and provide a brief overview of the key ideas and ideals underpinning the subjects of Russian and English in Russia and the subjects of Swedish and English in Sweden; 4) to provide a brief description of how teachers should organize the language classroom in order to promote communication and support learners’ language development.

In spring, the students were asked to analyse, discuss, and reflect upon videos of EFL classes focussing on such aspects of teaching languages as 1) classroom management; 2) lesson planning; 3) and teaching skills and strategies.
During the autumn and spring phases the following positive results were delivered. By the time the Russian delegation came to Malmö, all the participants of the project had got to know each other, the students had formed their Swedish-Russian study teams, exchanged their knowledge of the education systems, and set up themselves for cooperation in the project.

**Strengths and weaknesses**

The fulfilment of spring assignments and participation in related discussions enabled students to refresh their memories about the autumn observations in Swedish schools, discuss in a more detailed way a number of lesson practicalities, and find ties between the video lessons they observed and the theoretical background specific for Sweden and Russia.

The News forum was also used for posting important announcements (as it was mentioned above) concerning the organisation of the virtual cooperation and visits.

The virtual cooperation as well as the visits themselves became a real eye-opener for the students from Russia because Russian students are more accustomed to tighter teacher control and individual task performance.

Finally, the project forums in Moodle can be regarded as a collection of interesting and valuable study materials both for students and teachers. Thus, one can find the most vibrant autumn discussions devoted to final school exams, the grading systems, public and private schools, classes in religion, students with special needs, bullying in schools, and many other educational issues in both countries, Sweden and Russia. The discussions in spring touched upon such language teaching issues as different ways of assessment, definitions of accuracy and fluency, definitions of transitions in classroom management, non-intrusive error-correcting, eliciting, code-switching etc. As well as the discussions, Moodle contains reports drawn up by the Swedish and
Russian students and teachers. The reports were made on the basis of cultural observations made by both delegations during their visits and include the following subjects: University environment, educational process at University, school environment, educational process at school, teacher-student relations, student-student relations, students, the everyday life.

We should also mention problems that we faced during the virtual period. First of all, some students were quite inactive in the discussions. That is why we think the effective organisation of the virtual period needs to consider the following points.

Firstly, when scheduling the virtual period it is important to choose a period which is free from tests, exams, teaching practices, and other kinds of time-consuming academic activities which may prevent students from active participation in discussions.

Secondly, it is necessary to make sure that candidates trying out for the project are fully aware of the length of the project, its main aim and activities as well as the prospects that this project may provide for their future careers.

Thirdly, the motivation of the participants may increase further if they are informed that their opportunity to participate in the intensive weeks depends on their online activeness. Participants also can be excused from some test or exam.

The problem of organising and controlling the virtual period is tightly connected with the need to analyse discussions and provide feedback. In order to provide proper feedback, we analysed three aspects of the discussions: maintaining the flow of a discussion, the form of discussion posts, the content of discussion posts.
The main idea of the project, as I understand it, was observing language classes and comparing practice with theory. One of the most difficult things about observation was the effort not to judge the teachers, not to assess them, but to simply observe and write down the facts about the lesson. We observed classes in groups of four and had a small discussion after each lesson. We focused on several things: students’ motivation, materials, atmosphere during the lesson, lesson planning, the behaviour of students and teachers’ oral feedback. We also paid attention to background information, e.g. the number of students in the class, their age and number of years that they studied English, the distribution of boys and girls in the classroom, and the design of the classroom.

Summing up our observations in Russian and Swedish school I would like to mention the following differences and similarities:

- In Russian, the number of students in each class was considerably smaller than in Sweden
• In both countries the approach to teaching was mostly communicative
• In both countries teachers had a leading role in organizing activities in the name of learning and language development
• In both countries the materials used mostly comprised textbooks and handouts

All in all we found more similarities in the way languages are taught in our countries than I had expected at the beginning of the project.

As a teacher myself, I could not stop comparing my own performance with that of the observed teachers. One of the Swedish teachers impressed me a lot. In a lesson of Swedish involving reading, every student worked individually with a text, and the classroom was quite silent. However, all the students were inspired by their work and concentrated on it. It was absolutely clear that the students respected the teacher. They were really interested in her opinion about their answers and asked for her advice. The atmosphere was very different from that of another English lesson which also focused on reading. Here the students were bored and inactive.

After the first lesson, we interviewed the teacher asking her if she found it difficult to make students do tasks that were perhaps not so interesting but still necessary. Was she not afraid of losing their attention? Her answer was as follows: “At first, when I was young, I tried to make the lessons as funny and interesting as possible. But then I understood that if you want a good result, you can’t always have fun with students. Education is not only about fun”.

Her words can be used to capture some of the essence of our project. There was certainly lots of fun in it, but there was also a lot of intellectual work and in combination these helped to shape a unique experience that I will never forget.
9 A country of contrasts

Maria Bergqvist and Viola Sten

Maria Bergqvist, soon to be teacher of English and Arts, has a particular interest in media literacy. Viola Sten is a future teacher of Swedish and Media and Communication with a background as a journalist.


Russians. Serious people. When applying for a visa, smiling is not allowed. A serious face is required for the application photo. Entering Russia, we came to realise the true meaning of a serious face! The customs lady gave us a taste of the Russians expertise in looking grave, but we were greeted at the airport with smiling faces and warm embraces. On the way from the airport we got a sampling of the grandness of the tsars as well as of the drama of the history and the traces of communism. Shiny gold next to cold concrete. Our first meal on Russian ground was a solid cabbage pie and toxic tasting berry juice, but we also tasted divine “call your parents”-cake served by the friendliest waitresses ever.
The schools, like the country, offered further contrasts. We saw old school buildings with murals telling tales of communism and classrooms equipped with modern technology. We saw pupils in uniforms and teachers in formal wear having lessons in cosy, personalised classrooms. We were struck by hierarchic systems and greeted by curious teachers and brave students trying to teach us Russian.

One of the more evident differences was that the groups were very small. We never saw an English class with more than eight pupils. We were told that it was common standard to divide the classes into smaller groups for language classes. The tempo of the lessons was very high. In all of the classes we observed there was a great number of tasks to be covered in one lesson. This made the lessons dynamic, but on the other hand there was little room for reflection or time for the pupils to complete tasks. Pupils were expected to respond promptly and if anyone hesitated, the question was swiftly passed on or answered by the teacher herself.

For every difference there was also something very similar. One moment students were doing strict grammar drills, the next they were drawing pictures. Some aspects of the system seemed old-fashioned to us while, at the same time, we were surprised to find classrooms equipped with smart boards and computers and teachers who put different media texts to use.

The lasting impression was that it was not that different after all. It all boiled down to dedicated teachers who loved their work and tried to pass on their enthusiasm and knowledge to all their students. Differences are noticed because you expect them, but when you collaborate across cultures there is a need to find some common ground.

Another insight came from the group work which made us realize that we know more than we sometimes give ourselves credit for. When you are a student it is often easy (and mostly required) to rely on books
as your source of knowledge and point of reference, but, in Russia – having the discussions and making the presentations on a very tight schedule and without any reference literature – we were forced to draw on our own knowledge and experiences. As a consequence, we become aware of our own competences and strengths while benefitting from the knowledge and experience of others. What we particularly gained from participating in the project was the relations created; between students and professors, across nations and cultures, between people from different generations, backgrounds, with different interests and experiences. Working together made us aware of your own ideals and that these can be both strengthened and challenged when meeting others. This gave us new perspectives and forced us to become aware of and explain our practices or aspects in our own culture and habits that are perhaps too familiar to notice.

So, Russia, did you live up to our expectations? Well, we got onion domes and extravagance in abundance, but we also got a glimpse of life at schools. We met kind, dedicated and down-to-earth teachers in glamorous dresses and stiletto heels. We also saw people so grave that it made us giggle, but we also met some of the sweetest people ever. We filled our bags with matrjosjkas and colourful scarves, but filled our hearts with new friendships and experiences.

Russia. Confirming and contradicting our expectations. A country of contrasts.
10 Close but different

Yana Borisovskaya
At the time of writing Yana Borisovskaya was a student of Saint Petersburg State University and its Faculty of Philology. She is presently a teacher and training specialist in Denis’ School.

When I arrived in Malmö on a Sunday evening, everything was quiet and the streets were empty. In Saint Petersburg, stores and cafés are open late and people are everywhere. I was excited by the stillness and tried to look through windows to find some life. What were people doing in their flats, supposedly full of furniture which interior design magazines call Swedish style? In dimly lit rooms where secret lives took place I captured some glimpses of comfort.

The following morning I found myself walking through the streets in the morning mist, the wet asphalt smelling of falling leaves and rain. Again there were few people and no one hurried up or ran through the streets as in Russia.

When I reached the university building, I was struck by the absence of security guards. The building was open to visitors which made the place feel homey rather than official. I had never before seen a university with a kitchen on each floor with fridges and microwave ovens where students could prepare the food that they had cooked at
home. And the library. It reminded me of a co-working place where students can gather together to create, discuss and simply do their home assignments. I was pleased to see that all resources and books were free to access, and students were everywhere. Their creativity filled me with energy and motivation!

I would now like to connect these observations of locations and exteriors to educational processes and teacher-student relations.

Everyone probably associates schools with certain stereotypes, for example teachers. Like many other children who grew up in post-soviet Russia, I imagine a typical teacher as a very strict woman who knows what is good or bad and underlines that you are just a child who does not know anything about the cruel world. The last point is crucial – we did not feel ourselves comfortable at school, and the teachers kept pointing out that they were older and wiser. It was not possible to question the teachers’ authority, but deep down, every child wants to feel equal.

When I graduated from secondary school I was full of expectations and dreams that at university teacher-student relations would be totally different because we were adults already. But from the very beginning of my first university year I was disappointed with the teachers since their behaviour was similar to what I had experienced at school. Nothing had changed, only more reproaches that made us feel how poor our knowledge was. In such a situation the only thing you can do is to put up with the situation despite not having a chance to feel comfortable. Very rarely were we awarded with encouragement, maybe at the end of a project or an academic year. Sometimes I feel that it is in the spirit of Russians to make you feel depressed and some time later say ‘not bad’.

These experiences may be compared to what I experienced at the adult education centre in the classes that targeted immigrants who were studying Swedish and English. First of all I noticed an absence of
formal greetings and names. In addition to the informal tone between teacher and students there was small talk about how things were going. In Russia, it is mandatory to address your teacher by name, including the father’s name. If you do not name your teacher this way you are disrespectful. In the Swedish classrooms we visited the atmosphere was marked by mutual respect where students were expected to express their own opinions and ideas without being afraid of disagreeing with the teacher or someone else.

In Russia, we have always been proud of our educational system. Many generations have acquired very fundamental qualified knowledge and skills in different disciplines, and relations between teacher and students were very formal and based on psychological distance. When the USSR broke up this relational model stayed the same but often teaching approaches amounted to drilling.

When I was a school girl I did not believe in learning based on the memorisation of facts and details. To my mind the best way of studying was to learn main ideas and be able to explain them. But in our schools teachers forced us study textbooks in a very detailed way, and it was no wonder we hated most subjects. It was strange that we went to school at all. If you did not answer according to the textbook, you would end up with a poor grade or a fail.

One semester my English teacher gave me a C despite the fact that I could speak English and not only read and translate boring texts. Maybe this was due to her unwillingness to improve her teaching methods to make us students want to learn something new and feel at ease as learners? When I visited Swedish schools I came to the conclusion that the teachers there did not think along such lines. They behaved more like experienced and skilled friends who guided their students in the world of knowledge. The idea is really very simple to share one’s ideas and skills as a teacher with students in close and creative settings. The teachers in their transparent classrooms tried to
make every student feel comfortable – sometimes more than twenty-five – and they achieved this through a cross-cultural experience that encouraged the students to use the language to make meaning while enjoying the learning process.

I came to the conclusion that what you will definitely not see in the Russian educational system is any freedom in the learning process. The Sweden educational system is open to new ideas and one of the main activities is projects and the ability to express oneself in writing. As I mentioned above it is important to express your own thoughts and opinions and be able to keep a discussion going.

In our project, the aim has not been to criticize either of the educational systems but to compare and share our cultural experiences. In my text I suggested that some post-soviet stereotypes and traditions are still strong in people’s minds. I suppose that we need more time to deal with different limitations and problems. We do so not by breaking everything down but by making improvements bit by bit, and this is why it is so interesting to work together – like we did in our project – to discover things through international dialogue.
11 Preconceptions and insights

Sabina Thambert
Sabina Thambert studies to become a teacher of Swedish and Physical Education at upper secondary level.

When thinking about all the experiences I had during the project, my thoughts always return to certain occasions that really made an impression on me. I would be lying if I said that I did not have any preconceptions about schooling in Russia before talking to Russian students and visiting classes. One of my thoughts about what it would be like ‘over there’ was that it would remind me of school as it was here, in Sweden in the 90’s, e.g. concerning equipment in classrooms. This preconception was both realized and refuted. It was realized due to the fact that most of the classrooms had black boards instead of whiteboards or smartboards. It was refuted because of the fact that some classrooms had modern equipment, which the teachers used in an inspiring way. Furthermore, many of the pupils had their own iPads. This really surprised me because this kind of equipment has to be financed by the pupils themselves, if they can afford it. The mixing of the old and modern was reinforced when some of the students who were sitting in front of the blackboard used iPads to take notes and some wrote by hand.

Another preconception was that the classes would be very large. I could not have been more wrong! The classes I observed had an
average of 10 students. Just imagine the possibilities of not having to struggle with 25–30 students at the same time. Naturally, there are advantages and disadvantages regarding the number of students in a classroom. For example, in Sweden there is a greater chance to create groups where the students may help each other in a stimulating way. However, in Russian classrooms, there is more time for each student. This is obviously a great advantage for the teacher as well. One could say that Swedish classes are more dynamic and that Russian classes can offer students more student-teacher time, as well as a comfortable environment in which to develop. My own experience is that smaller groups have better cohesion and this is extremely positive.

Another interesting point concerns focus. At home much of the focus is placed on creating a communicative climate where you learn a language by using it. However, in Russia much more importance is placed on grammar exercises and students told me that this is because accuracy is so highly valued. However, I believe that accuracy and communication skills go hand in hand. Without the ability to communicate there may be language knowledge but not any ability to actually use it. There could be various explanations for our different focuses. Our first languages and their different structures could be one. Another reason could relate to differences in curricula. I was struck by several peculiarities that made a lasting impression on me: Teachers in Swedish schools are dressed quite casually. In the first class I observed in Russia, there were 9 students in the classroom and a young female teacher, who was wearing something resembling a cocktail dress and high heels. However it was not the number of students or the teacher which really surprised me. It was the continual grammar exercises and the students were only 7th graders! They were working with the grammatical function of the conditional!

In Russia the students begin to learn English at the age of 6. I witnessed 8 year-olds who presented their hobbies to each other in front of the class without any notes, perfectly. Research has shown that language education benefits the student by being used early on and in several
subjects. Therefore, if the students spend half the time studying in their mother tongue and the other half in a second language both the languages will develop more. One could say that the Russian schools that we visited are closer to the ideal, by encouraging the students to begin learning English at a young age, even though not every subject is studied in both languages. In Sweden a third of all children start studying English in year 1 while the remainder start studying the subject in year 3.

It seems as though there are both similarities and differences in our educational systems but I have to say that beneath all the superficial facts, like the names of schools and the way teachers dress, focus on content, group sizes and so on, the basics of teaching language are much the same. There is a common will to create curiosity and dedication by using methods and subjects that are intriguing and appeal to the students’ experiences in both countries. Two contrasting examples: in Sweden one teacher used a movie to compare it to the original book and thereby created a subject for discussion. In Russia a teacher experimented with writing imaginary smartphone texts. These examples confirm that interest can be created from both method and subject. We may do it in different ways but we must not forget that the contexts and conditions also differ.

The entire experience has been an eye opener! The intercultural meeting has enhanced my development and understanding for my own pupils. One important factor was the discussions with Russian university students. I was impressed by the conversations we shared. To express yourself in a language that is not your own is contradictory. Both harder and easier than it seems. Harder because often you have to circle around or find new ways of expressing yourself because you do not have the exact words or grammar. Easier because the person you are in conversation with invariably understands what you want to say and is helpful. This made me realize that the problems I conquered are obstacles that many of my pupils meet every single day. This is
why the wonderful experience of Russia and the Russian people, made such a great impression on me. At the same time I have increased my understanding of my own pupils and seen the need to create situations where I can make myself more accessible to them and hopefully they will feel more able to approach me.

*Visiting the library at Malmö University.*
12 What you will not see in the Russian educational system - Observations made by students and faculty members after the first visit to Malmö in 2012

The university environment

- In Russia, the number of students in each class was considerably smaller than in Sweden.
- Transparent classrooms, glass walls and doors.
- Facilities for students (microwaves and fridges).
- A prayer room for worshippers of all confessions.
- Prams and kids in the classrooms (sitting next to mums).
- Spacious recreation areas.
- Lots of seating so that students can cooperate.
- Coffee makers, sinks and free fresh fruit in baskets.
- Teachers’ personal working spaces (desks, PCs, shelves, books, etc.).
- Projectors and computers in EVERY room.
- Very comfortable and student-friendly library with all the
resources at hand; with free access to books, very spacious so that students can study and speak loudly without disturbing each other.

- Students have a personal card which shouldn’t be lost – it permits them to enter computer labs and the library.
- No security guards at the entrance hall (open for visitors).
- No need to show your identity card or any pass.
- Electronic access to the classrooms.
- Classrooms are booked in advance and the schedule is in the public domain, open to everyone at any time.
- Waste is sorted at the university canteen and recycling is in place throughout the building.
- There are several students’ communities which unite students from different towns and help them to find friends and feel part of the students’ society.
- Universities are more open to all people, not only to students, even university libraries can be used by the general public.

**Educational processes at the university**

- In Russia, the number of students in each language class is considerably smaller than in Sweden.
- Group project work as part of an oral exam.
- Providing students with examination tasks beforehand (one content area for the group of 4-5 students 2 weeks before the exam).
- Discussing group presentations outside the classroom (teacher’s giving his /her immediate feedback for each group in the corridor, while the rest of the group keep sitting inside and waiting).
• A considerable amount of failures during the exam is expected - ability to think and analyse is more important than demonstrating good language skills.

• Up to 15 students (out of 35 in the group) may drop out of the course without serious consequences for the teachers – it is accepted as part of the teaching process.

• Students that are to become teachers specialise on a certain age group of school children (primary school, 7-9 forms, high school).

• A lot of virtual communication between students and teachers (via the university Internet platform).

• Students take few notes during lectures; all materials are handed out by the teacher.

The school environment
(Komvux: an adult education centre)

• Immigrants are given a good opportunity to learn languages and get settled in Sweden, the tuition is free.

• Students are paid to attend school classes.

• Groups are formed according to the students’ educational background.

• Teachers consider the students’ cultural backgrounds while organising classroom activities.

• Friendly classroom atmosphere.

• Students are allowed to attend classes with their children.

• Spacious classrooms, plenty of chairs and desks, fresh air, books, maps, other materials can be found in every classroom so that everyone can use them.
• No criticism at all.
• Teachers don’t draw students’ attention to other students’ errors.

**Educational processes at school (Komvux)**

• Movement of students between groups of different levels depending on their academic achievement.
• If students don’t like an activity, they are not obliged to participate in it.
• Foreign language groups consisting of more than 25 students.
• Encouragement of extra class activities that concern the use of English (e.g. computer games in English, various chats and blogs and etc.).
• Anxiety-free atmosphere (e.g. students can even be extremely late for the classes).
• At SFI lessons students are free to choose which aspect they will study this day (what they need to focus on: grammar, writing or pronunciation), they need to sign in the corresponding lists.
• Before the lesson begins the atmosphere is very helpful, but at the same time teachers make the lessons go quite fast so it’s very dynamic and the class is motivated and active.

**Teacher-student relations**

• Very democratic, teachers are very approachable.
• Teachers behave equally towards students.
• Relations are based on mutual respect (students feel free to express their own ideas, to disagree with teachers).
• The relationship is less formal - a teacher is more like a colleague, who is more skilled and experienced and who is here to give sound advice, not to make someone learn and study.

• Students call teachers by their first names, greet each other with “hi”, but the students are nonetheless very respectful towards the teachers.

• All teachers are encouraging.

• Students are aware of the curriculum, so they can make suggestions and change it.

• Students are allowed to speak and move around the class during the lesson.

Student(s) – student(s) relations (at the university)

• The average age of the students is higher than in Russia; some are very mature (aged 40–45).

• Students are more motivated, they make choices consciously and already know what they want to do in future.

• Students’ choice of faculty and future occupation is weighed and balanced, that’s why they are so serious about their studies. They know for sure, what they’re going to do for a living after graduation, which dramatically contrasts with many Russian students.

• Students are very respectful while working in groups/pairs. They are helpful and really patient with each other, they don’t push you to say what they think is right or better. They are eager to understand each other’s opinions correctly and are truly interested in their partner’s thoughts.

• Always very encouraging, they made us feel welcome and free to express our thoughts (it seemed to me that in our group the
Russian students talked 2 or 3 times more than the Swedish students. They wanted us to feel at home. In my opinion their (students’) hospitality and regard played the biggest role in the research that we made. They made the communication work.

• The Swedish students were very attentive to each other, tolerant, polite, eager to understand and accept alternative points of view. They would switch into English every time we were nearby. What is more, having a better command of English, the Swedes (both professors and teacher students) would neither point out nor correct our errors and mistakes.

• Group work. While discussing some topics, students don’t feel shy about expressing their opinions about it.

• The Swedish students listened to each other without interruptions. They were also committed to the studies. Swedish students can afford to live on their own and not be a burden to their families due to the policy of Swedish government that provides loans for all students. In addition, they are older than the average Russian student, so their academic preferences are more reasonable.

**Everyday life**

• Bicycles are a major means of transport.

• Punctuality of public transport which is reflected on boards of each bus stop.

• Weekends and reasonable working hours are respected – it’s not typical for a shop to close later than 7 p.m. (except for food stores) and some are closed at weekends.

• No stray animals were spotted on the streets.
13 What the Swedes experienced during their visit in Saint Petersburg
May 13–19 2012

The university environment

• A beautiful courtyard with a very diverse collection of sculptures, most of them signifying culture, e.g. writers. It sends signals about what to appreciate.

• In some rooms there were black and white photographs of teachers of the university.

• You are not allowed to enter the library with your coat on.

• Pictures of former professors are seen at the walls; the professors are celebrated. No women represented.

• The environment was nice and I really liked the garden in the middle of the school and that music played during the breaks.

• Many people that we were very proud of their university and its history.

• More formal and strict compared to the Swedish university environment. Compared to Sweden the classrooms (and classes) were much smaller.
School visits: the school environment

- Huge differences between School 27 and the Academic Gymnasium. The former neat, modern and very clean. The latter somewhat run-down, but the students that we met were very proud of their school.
- The museum of the Academic gymnasium showed pictures from school trips where two people had died and pictures of well-known (male) science teachers.
- There was more security at the schools than we would see in Swedish schools.
- Some schools have dress codes for the students.
- The schools that I visited had a positive atmosphere. The students we spoke to were all very friendly and polite. The classrooms and classes were much smaller than in Sweden. Particularly one of the schools was very well equipped with all the latest technology.

The relationship between teachers and learners

- Big differences between the schools – as there would be in Sweden. The age of the learners is one factor. The limited number of learners in each class at the Academic gymnasium made all the students very visible. One of the teachers had a very warm relationship to her students. At the same time: she was a clear authority figure without being authoritarian.
- A very warm relationship between teachers and learners.
- Some of the teachers made sarcastic jokes.
- In some situations it appeared to be relaxed and comfortable, and in other situations it was more restrictive and formal.
In many ways I think it depends more on the teacher than the school system in general.

- I was amazed by the discipline that we saw. The students did not question why what they were doing in class. They were very polite. And I could still tell there was quite a lot of humour between the teachers and students.

- Teacher-led/teacher-centred.

**School visits: language teaching**

- There were huge differences between different settings. Some of the teaching was exemplary in how it combined high-level processing of content and language with connections to the students’ own lives and the life outside of the classroom.

- What was surprising was that the teachers spoke in English in almost the whole lesson. In Sweden the teacher often switches to Swedish, at least with younger students. Maybe the Russian learners were at a higher level than many Swedish learners of the same age.

- The language classes were a bit different from Sweden in the sense that the students didn’t talk a lot to each other but rather just to the teacher.

- The lessons we observed were all very well planned and structured. The teachers all based the lessons on topics that should be easy for the students to relate to. Compared to Sweden, there were less group activities and discussions going on. The communication was based a lot on a teacher – student relationship and never the other way around.

School visits: the children/the learners

• Polite, observant and respectful of one another
• The learners seemed very disciplined. They did not question the teacher or waste any time by playing with their cell phones.
• The learners were calm and polite. In Sweden calming the students down can take a lot of time and energy.
• It was interesting to see the differences between the students in a classroom and just a few minutes later outside in the corridor, it was like day and night.
• Motivated. Disciplined.

The observations

• The observations were fruitful, and we realized how much we can learn from watching other teachers. The teachers were welcoming towards us and some even used us to be interviewed by the pupils.
• Teacher-led classes. Hardly any pair- or group work. Focus on both meaning and form.
• A great opportunity to discover how different educational practices and traditions affecting our views of the same things.
• It was very interesting to be able to discuss our observations, both with the Russian and Swedish students.
• I gained a lot of knowledge and inspirations from the observations. A lot of things I observed will definitely be useful in my future work as a language teacher. The observations widened my perspectives on learning.
Group dynamics

- Our group worked very well. I find it very inspiring and meaningful to work together with students from other countries because everyone can contribute with their perspectives.
- The group was very much characterized by politeness and respect but also by humour and exchange of knowledge.
- Worked out very well, besides having learned a lot from each other, we have also get friends for life!
- It was great to be able to discuss our observations together in the group, and in the very end to see all the presentations. And we will keep in touch.
- I was rather surprised by how smooth the collaboration went. When you do group work, the most difficult part is always to pay attention to everyone’s opinion and to step aside and let things that you don’t agree with to 100% be a part of the end result. But I never felt that it was more problematic than usual just because I worked with Russian students this time.

The university exam (English for Specific Purposes)

- The attempts to capture real-language use in connection to different occupational practices (breweries, flight attendants etc.) were interesting. But to what extent is it really possible to go for such authenticity?
- It was very interesting to see how the students had developed their own teaching materials. I would like to do something similar in our teacher education.
- The exam was presented in the form of an oral presentation accompanied with power point slides. It was interesting to watch. The students got their feedback from the teacher directly after the presentation and it was shared with everyone.
• It has given me a new perspective of assessment, which is very different, compared to how it works in Sweden.

• I found the presentations and the task good and interesting. However, I did find the examination a little bit too strict maybe... I was thinking that there could have been some positive feedback as well.

• I enjoyed the presentations a lot and I wish we had a course just as practical as ESP seemed to be at Malmö University. The task seemed to be both challenging and rewarding.

Saint Petersburg

• Steeped in history, full of people and cars.

• The parts we have seen were mainly neat and beautiful. The water makes the city livelier.

• Fantastic old buildings and cathedrals. Very clean even though it is sometimes difficult to find a trash can.

• One of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen. It has its own and unique history, and as a visitor it is an amazing feeling to walk around and see all those beautiful buildings, and get a sense of the atmosphere and meet all those lovely people!

• I have visited St Petersburg several times through literature and so I had high expectations. Luckily, all my expectations were fulfilled and I hope I can go back soon again!
14 Similarities and differences

Jasmin Mourad, Eva Nilsson and Lisa Sassersson
When this text was written, Eva, Jasmin and Lisa were teacher students at Malmö University. Jasmin now works as a secondary school-teacher, and she feels that the experience of participating in the project gave her new perspectives on different teaching methods. Eva works as a teacher of Swedish and Spanish at a secondary school in Malmö.

In Russia, education appeared to be more valued than it is in Sweden. We also sensed that in Russia, schools have a stronger connection to the history of the country and to traditions. At several of the schools that we visited, the buildings were an example of this and they seemed to have a symbolic value. This was also certainly true for Saint Petersburg State University with its beautiful stone floors and high vaulted ceilings. When we entered the library, it felt almost as if the time had stopped. We sensed a piece of Russian history and ancient traditions. Through our visits, we saw that many old traditions are still very much alive. In Sweden, very few people probably identify themselves through a historical past.

Another difference concerned clothing in the Russian schools. In some schools the teachers as well as the students followed dress codes. The female teachers were expected to wear a skirt and a blouse, or if they wanted to pants with a blazer. No jeans were allowed. This type of clothes is almost like a uniform and creates a feeling of seriousness and
puts the teacher and the students in a special role. Is this type of formal dress code a reflection of hierarchies in Russian society?

The teachers we observed in Russia had different personalities and leader styles. Some teachers treated their students almost like their children. They had a very friendly approach and made a lot of jokes. Other teachers kept more distance to the students. But even though the teachers had different leader styles, all the teachers had control over their students. As a consequence, the students respected their teachers and did not question their methods. In Swedish schools, teachers often have to struggle to get the students’ respect and motivate them to do different tasks. This can take away the focus from learning and make lessons less effective. In the Russian schools that we visited, we did not observe any kind of side-tracking in the classrooms; no students were playing with their cell phones, questioning the teacher or asking when lessons ended. The lessons that we observed lasted for 45 minutes and these minutes were used effectively. We also found that the teachers had a strict plan for every lesson and were often able to work through all of it. The impression we gained was that the Russian students were more motivated and active than their Swedish counterparts.

Through our visits in different Russian schools we discovered that we often take things for granted in Sweden, such as the possibility to choose what to wear in school. We also found that some of the teaching methods used in Sweden in language education are not always the best. However, some of the teaching methods we experienced in Russia limited the children’s opportunities to express themselves open-endedly by for example voicing their thoughts, feelings and experiences. To conclude, we should learn from each other and attempt to create a fruitful pedagogical environment for both teachers and students.
15 A direct approach to teaching Swedish

Elfia Abdurakhmanova
Elfia Abdurakhmanova is a student of Saint Petersburg State University, the Faculty of Philology, where she studies the theory and practice of teaching English as a second language.

Many countries face challenges in connection to the integration of immigrants and Sweden is no exception. Organising successful education at a school that caters to recently arrived immigrants is thus a challenging task. What makes language teaching in such a multicultural environment special? To begin with, there are obvious cultural and social differences that require teachers to think of special ways of managing the classroom. Secondly, at the first stages of learning a language – as there is no common language – students and teachers have to deal with different communication problems. This makes teachers look for alternative ways of explaining texts. Finally, sometimes students work in large groups, and that requires careful choice of activities.

According to what I could see Komvux Södervärn has found ways of dealing with many of the challenges linked to social diversity. One example is that groups there are formed not only according to the students’ language level, but also according to the students’ educational
background. The issue of cultural differences may seem to be more complicated, as students from various countries may be joined together in the same group. But this is where classroom management comes in. As we observed, in most of the classes students were seated in small groups around the desks. The groups were formed based on the geography of the students’ native countries: European, Arab countries, Asian countries. The members of a small group could thus represent similar habits, religion and even language.

From the perspective of language learning it could be argued that it is not efficient to unite people speaking the same language—this gives them an opportunity to avoid using the target language in their group work—but we must not forget that the psychological comfort of the students is even more important. When students find themselves among those who are alike them they are bound to feel more at ease and concentrate on the process of learning. Besides, the small groups interacted with each other successfully when a special task was given. As a result, the students seemed to get easily accustomed to the new learning environment.

The fact that the students in each class represented such a tremendous cultural and linguistic variety provided the basis for a direct approach to teaching. The purpose of this approach is to help students to make a direct association between the target language and meaning. New vocabulary is explained through demonstration, not translation. And this is exactly what we observed at Komvux Södervärn.

According to the direct method, the use of native languages is not welcome but at such a school like Komvux their use is hardly possible. Instead the teachers used gestures, synonyms and rephrasing to help the students understand new meanings. In addition it was clear that the teachers encouraged students to use the foreign language as a means of communication. Group and pair work, asking each other questions, telling one another about the partner—these tasks gave
them opportunities to use the language in real contexts. Apart from speaking tasks and activities on vocabulary, students also worked on other skills – reading, listening and writing, but it was clear that oral communication was seen as the basic skill. This communicative approach seems to be efficient as this is how the students are expected to use the language in everyday life, to speak.

In conclusion, we gained a lot from the experience of observing classroom practices. Getting the opportunity to see language teaching approaches at work is fascinating, especially at a time when language learning is a global matter and no longer the privilege of educated people. It is a necessity. I also believe that ideas can migrate, as well as people change countries in search for a better or more secure place of living.
16 Overcoming prejudice

Boel Ahlner

Boel Ahlner is a student teacher at Malmö University; her major subject is English and her minor is Swedish.

When starting the project, I must admit to being somewhat prejudiced about Russia and its educational system. Nevertheless, when I met the Russian students, I noticed that there were just as many differences of opinion and behavior among the Russian students as there were among the Swedish students. This is what really interested me: the similarities between us, and how the Russians sometimes did not fit into my expectations of what they “should have been like”.

Before observing lessons at Russian schools, I thought that the teachers would be very strict and the pupils frightened. Even so, the teachers behaved differently from one another, with some being humorous and wanting the students to speak their minds, whereas others were more serious and strict. Finally, there were other teacher roles in between. In addition, parts of the schools worked even better in Russia compared to Sweden, which came as a surprise. For instance, there were no more than 10 pupils in each classroom, compared to the common picture in Sweden: 25–30 pupils per teacher and classroom. It was both interesting and rewarding to realize that other systems and methods were used, and that they worked well or even better than in Sweden.
Even though I mention similarities and differences, overthrowing prejudices is not always about this, it is about looking “behind the scenes”, to see people as individuals. However, seeing similarities may help to overthrow prejudice, to be able to think “that person and I come from different countries and cultures; yet, we have a lot in common”, or “this other system is different from mine, but it also works”. I believe that this way of thinking also facilitates cooperation between people, since there is a chance for a better understanding of one another.

I wish that I could say that I am not prejudiced. Prejudice can destroy meetings, cooperation and relationships between people. All the same, I know that I am prejudiced, I am aware of it, and awareness is important. I can try to meet people from certain countries/cultures/groups, to be able to get other and new impressions, and to base my ideas of people on that, rather than from what I have heard from others.

I hope for cooperative projects like this one to continue happening, both in schools, at universities, and in working places. Despite the fact that family and one’s culture(s) can help create or overthrow prejudice, I believe that education also can do a lot. Cooperative projects contain the possibility to open people’s minds, and there are few things that are as important in today’s global world.
17 The role of classroom climate in language teaching

Kseniia Zaretckaia
Kseniia Zaretckaia is a fifth-year student at the Faculty of Philology at the Saint Petersburg State University. She studies English and German.

When academics discuss language teaching, they usually discuss methods, approaches or theories, applied by teacher during a lesson. When other people talk about language learning they often refer to the atmosphere prevailing at a certain lesson – that is, they speak about the classroom climate.

In this text I will touch upon ways of creating a positive classroom climate at school, including some examples from our observations at Swedish and Russian schools.

A positive classroom climate is important since it establishes a certain context for learning. Students feel safe and free to express their thoughts and opinions in a foreign language, and they can easily start discussing some topic and provide it with pros and cons. All in all, they often will not need a teacher to push them into a discussion. If they feel at ease with the situation, they will engage in discussions as if they were outside the school. As soon as this special context has been established, students start making progress in their studies and as a consequence getting better grades.
Teacher can promote a positive classroom atmosphere in different ways. Firstly, students should not be restricted in expressing their thoughts and feelings, but there must definitely be a set of rules, which is oriented towards concentrated learning and respect of one another’s opinions, feelings, culture, nationality and – when dealing with multilingual groups of students – language backgrounds. It is very important that these norms must be explained by the teacher and accepted by the students at the beginning of a course. Moreover, this friendly, caring and tolerant classroom atmosphere should be maintained throughout the language course. When students keep to these rules, they are provided with boundaries and are able to make good choices to the benefit of all the learners.

Secondly, a teacher should get students motivated in collaborating with each other and participating in discussions using special discussion techniques. One should remember that students are equal partners in communication, to be exact, they are team players, and everyone has a right to speak. Moreover, it is recommended that the teacher organizes group and pair work. In addition, topics should appeal to students. In order to build a united class, it is necessary to get the students interested in helping each other, for example, supporting students who are falling behind.

Thirdly, we need to touch upon relations between a teacher and his/her students and the interaction that takes place between them. A teacher is to maintain positive relationships with each of his/her students regardless of their backgrounds and abilities. A welcoming and supportive classroom climate exists if the teacher is friendly towards the students and shows that he/she cares about them. Both the Swedish and Russian teachers that we met were kind-hearted and caring people. One Swedish teacher smiled and joked throughout the lesson, and she greeted some late-comers in a very friendly way. A Russian teacher attentively asked students about their health, and she shared and discussed a problem she had had with them.
Fourthly, teachers should believe in students, hoping that they can and will learn the language. A good way to show students that a teacher trusts them is, for example, to express uncertainty about the meaning of a given word and ask them to look it up in a dictionary.

Evaluating if the classroom atmosphere is positive does not have to be a difficult process. One may hand out questionnaires to students to fill in or have one-to-one interviews with the students. Based on the outcomes, the teacher needs to make adjustments and attempt to modify the classroom atmosphere if necessary. However, a classroom atmosphere is co-created by teachers and students, and it comes into being in a context where teachers and learners together engage in purposeful and meaningful activities that focus on learning.
What happens when Russian and Swedish student teachers of language observe the same classroom practices? Do they make similar or different observations and draw similar conclusions? Will their explanations be grounded in shared beliefs about language teaching or will differences in traditions and ideals be revealed?

In this Educational report you can read about a two-year intercultural project involving students and faculty members from the State University of Saint Petersburg and Malmö University.