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Group works impact on the cognitive learning processes in the ESL classroom

Grupparbetets påverkan på de kognitiva inlärningsprocesserna i ESL klassrummet

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Grundlärarexamen med inriktning mot arbete i årskurs

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Preface

We have been requested to present our work and participation of this work. We hereby formally declare that all work was done in front of one computer together equally. No one party worked on this thesis alone. We both shared the responsibility and burden of what is now a final production.

Our signatures below confirm the authenticity of the statement above.

Oskar Nilsson  Patricia Hay
Abstract

This empirical research thesis examines the role group work impacts towards the traditional practices in the classroom when developing language skills, and encouraging children to communicate inside the Swedish ESL classroom. For this study we examined the theoretical standings of the socio-cultural views in the classrooms and what the group researchers say about the practice of working inside the classroom through group work. We did this through a method called qualitative analysis where we sent out questionnaires to our target group, and then from these results had a written interview with a Swedish teacher working in an ESL classroom. Since the Swedish curriculum (2011) does not bring up any forms of how to work with language development only explains that it should be learned through interaction we choose to examine how teachers work in the ESL classroom with group work. In the discussion part of this paper we will present our findings from a social learning point of view and present our findings in accordance with Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theories.

Key term: Questionnaire, Teachers perspective, ESL classroom, Group work, Language development
Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge all the teachers both international and national that have contributed to this study and worked so hard for us to get the answers in time and wholeheartedly answered our questions of group work even if we had to change the aim of this study from an international comparison study to a national focused one, we would like to acknowledge the teachers from Poland, Taiwan, Algeria, Serbia and Saudi Arabia whom all took the time out of their busy schedule to participate in our thesis. We would also like to thank all those Swedish teachers who participated and are presented in this thesis. We would also like to acknowledge our supervisor whom helped us form what initially was a giant unfocused mess to the precis work that it is today and our peers for helping us with the structuring of our thesis. Without any of you we would be lost in this endeavor.
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1. Introduction

As part of our teacher training at Malmö University, we undertook VFU, which is practical training in a partner school environment over several periods extended throughout our entire education. During this period, which extends to four weeks at a time, we noticed the various problems concerning group work and student participation in particular. Moreover, we observed and partially participated in various group projects during this period. These projects often entailed communication exercises where the students were expected to deliver some form of conversation together and also expected to cooperate in helping each other’s learning processes. In particular, we noted that during group work that some students were involved, motivated and active, while others were not as involved in conversations and discussions. In addition, they often lacked the participation skills, such as having low motivation for starting a conversation or not fully involving themselves actively in a group.

We asked ourselves: How could we as teachers motivate these students to find the fun and meaning when in a group working with peers? After jointly discussing our experiences during the training period, we noticed that the issue peeked our interest and has inspired us to investigate different types and levels of encouragement when developing learning environments through cooperation exercises. We also examined how to effectively plan a group project as a teacher and what the obstacles might be, and how to know what to work around when planning such an activity.

Johnson & Johnson (1989) best describe the benefits of working with a group situation and cooperation, when compared with individual endeavors, and state that it tends to result in higher achievement, higher cognitive long term memory of what is learned, consistent use of critical thinking and meta-cognitive thought process, more correct and imaginative problem-solving, a willingness to take on difficult tasks and persist (despite difficulties) in working toward a common goal, higher motivation (wanting to participate), explicit learning situations, and greater time spent on the task. They continue by describing a situation where the students did not have a goal or an outcome reward, and in this situation they found the students lacked the motivation needed for cooperation to occur (ibid.). This raised further questions about how to effectively create a cooperative learning lesson with a task reward during ESL classes. We found several examples that pointed to the importance of planning ahead when working with group work in the classroom to...
inspire and encourage students to participate in their own learning. Co-operational talk episodes are one form of group work that can help students realize their potential together with other students and can help improve their language development together. This is also explained in the Swedish National Curriculum, the guidance reference system for all teachers whom practice in Sweden, in many passages as it refers to cognitive growth through discussion and social learning.

When discussing how cooperation talk episodes function, they are referred as links between higher cognitive abilities and the sociocultural dimensions of communicational success, innovations and co-­construction of language in interactions (Foster & Otto, 2005; Swain & Tocalli-­Beller, 2007). This is also supported in the Swedish National Curriculum (2011) by “Different aspects of knowledge and learning are natural starting points for such a discussion. Knowledge is a complex concept, which can be expressed in a variety of forms – as facts, understanding, skills, familiarity and accumulated experience – all of which presupposes and interacts with each other”( p.12). A problem area we came across when we were on our VFU was that the pupils were often divided into groups without any purpose, for example, by name order or by numeric order, but also two and two and by placement. We started discussing this point because this is something that might have resulted in being more beneficial for the development if the groups were predetermined in the lesson plan. Because scholars point to the importance of having structure when putting together group work, this got our attention. Could something like this hinder students’ co-operative skills and language outcome from being placed randomly in groups?

When referring to social learning and co-operation talk episodes, we would point to the complex nature of the Zone of Proximal Development and being able to grow through stimulus from peers. The Zone of Proximal Development is a theory first developed by the Russian constructivist Vygotsky, who believed that the child has a level of learning which can be achieved with the right scaffolding, scaffolding at the right time and by someone with proficiency in the subject matter, to reach his/her potential for unlocking higher knowledge when learning. This is known in the educational system as social learning theory and will henceforth be abbreviated as ZPD. In an article about the benefits of working through group cooperation while learning and expanding their vocabulary and language development together, Susan Verner (2011) presents several findings these are; encouraging students to talk, by learning to help each other and by challenging each
other, they grow closer to each other and encourage each other during the work. She goes on to express that there are several key points to group work in the ESL classroom for teachers as well as the students. Group work as a tool activates different learning styles and creates clarity for the student because you can see their misunderstandings in time and give authentic feedback in time (p.1).

In summary we found that to reach cognitive growth and social stimuli in a group it has to be properly executed and planned beforehand. We noticed that this is seldom the case; and even when it is planned, it does not follow the theories of co-operational learning, which we have stated in the previous paragraphs. We would like to examine these further in relevance to theoretical approaches to see if we can reach a different result when we put together a bigger picture of this situation.

1.1 Research question

When out working our work place/VFU in Sweden, we have both experienced the benefits of working and developing languages through group activities. Consequently, we want to examine the teachers’ point of view when creating the cognitive learning environment, which is supported by constructivism and social culturalism theorist Lev Vygotsky, and if this is indeed a common working method or if it is something which is not being utilized in schools today. We will be doing this by collecting qualitative data through questionnaires and also an interview with a Swedish ESL teacher. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the role that group work embraces when developing a foreign language like English in the second language classroom.

1. How do ESL teachers in year 4-6 structure group work?
2. Is their structuring of group work in relation to cooperative teaching?
2. Literature review

In this section we will present what the theoretical premises define when it comes to ESL, language development and the Swedish school system.

2.1 The ESL classroom

Lundahl (2014) describes that Swedish youths are exposed to large amounts of English in their spare time. The English teachers have to take this into account and build on in the ESL classroom; this is why the English teaching needs to be modified in the classroom to fit the current use of the language, and this is because you have to build upon the benefits that come with students who share the same language and culture (p. 18). In the National Curriculum for English (2011) it reads “pupils should be given the opportunity to develop all-round communicative skills. These skills involve understanding spoken and written English, being able to formulate one’s thinking and interact with others in the spoken and written language and the ability to adapt use of language to different situations, purposes and recipients” (p.32). It does not state anywhere in the Curriculum how you should do that, but it does talk about having insight in how people live around the world. While it is possible to learn a language without using it, it is harder than immersing you in that target language. Here is where communicative group work comes in, and developing the different strategies needed to use that target language. Group work in the ESL classroom, trains the different strategies needed to build up meaning about English language rules, and how to use the language appropriately. This is because you know that you have the security of your classroom surroundings. You and your classmates are at the same level when learning in an ESL classroom and that knowledge makes it easier to rely on help from your teacher and confident incentive from your peers when working to improve your language in the group. This is because the teacher is there to give support, and scaffolding when needed. This is important because of the organization needed in the ESL classroom communicative exercises, to give the student the best opportunity to evolve their language skills together as a group.

2.2 Defining group work

The modern cooperative learning began in the 1960’s. They have in accordance with other researchers conducted studies since 1970 when they published their first notification about
cooperative learning. In their article, they continue to explain the research history about cooperative learning and the resistance the method encountered from the Darwinists and individualists who thought that the students should be taught to survive in a dog-eat-dog world and ‘harsh individualist’, do it yourself attitude. Despite this they write that co-operation is now a part of the daily environment both in the work setting and school. They explain that there exists something that is called negative social interdependence and positive social interdependence, which are tightly knit to the interaction processes in group work (Johnson & Johnson 1999). The description of positive social interdependence is when the individual student feeling that he or she can only obtain their target goal if and only if their peers (in the same group) can obtain their goals; this leads to the promoting of each other when working on a common goal. The other thing they bring up is negative social interdependence, which is when the student feels he/she cannot obtain his/her target goal because their peers (in their group) cannot reach their goals. This leads to sabotage in the group, even if it is unconscionable sabotage (Deutsch, 1949, 1962; Johnson, 1970; D. W. Johnson & R. Johnson, 1989).

Forslund Frykedal (2008) tells us that (Brown 2000) stipulates that the term group has a variety of meanings. He points out that group work is when individuals work together, they are dependent on each other and they have a common goal. If someone in the group is affected by an event or a thing, it affects the whole group. Forslund Frykedal later describes that (Johnson & Johnson 1997, 2002, and 2007) believe that modern society cannot develop unless individuals learn to cooperate in groups and learn how to see other individuals’ perspectives (2008, p.5,7). This could be done by working on a common collaborative project, such as the benefits of recycling in science class at a local school. It could become international and contain many parties, such as the European Union, when they meet and collaborate on different goals for the commonwealth of that Union. Group work can contain two parties collaborating together or many hundreds, as long as they help each other towards a common goal.

For the classroom group work is defined as a tool, for the practice of ZPD and social learning. What you cannot achieve alone, you can try and overcome together. Hristie & Martin (1997) are two educational researchers that claim the benefits of group work in the language classroom would improve the quality of learning if teachers would stipulate, and scaffold basic ground rules when
achieving this type of work inside the language classroom. The ground rules they used in their research were:

1. all relevant information is shared;
2. the group seeks to reach agreement;
3. the group takes responsibility for decisions;
4. reasons are expected;
5. challenges are accepted;
6. alternatives are discussed before a decision is taken; and,
7. all in the group are encouraged to speak by other group members.

Even if the ground rules used in the language classroom are not exactly the same as those above, it is important to note when organizing group work, specific planning strategies as those above should be scaffolded to the students beforehand, and an explicit set of rules should apply when working with group work in the classroom setting (ibid.). This is also supported in Gibbons (2013) book, when she argues for the explicit rules to follow in the second language learner classroom, and abiding by their demands (p.97). Since second language learners need scaffolding in the ESL classroom it is relevant to provide the right atmosphere for Vygotsky’s theories. These theories will be further explained in the next section.

2.3 Language development and motivation

Vygotsky’s theory of language acquisition describes the gaining of knowledge as a social process. He believed in the gaining of knowledge being a two-part action. He refers to this as the theory of ZPD (zone of proximal development). This means that the adult, and there hence the master language interpreter (the teacher), acts like a scaffolding tool in the conversations between the two learners, and the theory of Internalization, which means that a child will process the information it acquires internally. Then in a social context, like group co-operational exercises, expand that knowledge consciously by interacting in a social environment (Vygotsky, 1999). Huit and Hummel (2003) explain that Piaget’s theory of intelligence explains the origin of children’s thought process and development. He observed and devised his theories from the classroom environment when he was asked to make French questions for English intelligence tests in 1936. While observing he noted that children learn from their environment and he mentions two ways how the children make
sense of what they experience, these theories are termed assimilation and accommodation. Accommodation means that the new information challenges the child’s view of the world around it and it needs to change the original information henceforth while assimilation, though the information changes, fits in to the pre-existing knowledge and no big world defining move needs be (p.1). Bogum and Yoon (2012) agree with this previous statement, that the thought processes Vygotskij and Piaget advocate are indeed what you might find in the learning environment. That learning is indeed an active practice (p.1). This to points to the theories that students’ expand their knowledge of the world by learning together, like they would do in group exercises. Here they get the opportunity to challenge each other by questioning each other’s reasoning and helping each other form world views, and meaning together.

According to Gibbons (2013), confidence is something that many ESL learners do not have. She points out that confidence is a motivational tool, and that it is a fundamental requirement when learning a second language. She also argues in her theories, how important scaffolding is when it comes to promote confidence when using the language, this leads to increased interest for further knowledge acquisition and development (p.97). When working in groups students’ can help each other by being supportive and giving constructive feedback. This then leads to communicative growth and higher self confidence in both the group, and in individual students.

Watson & Battistich (2006) explains that the environment and culture in the classroom created by the teacher is dependent and influenced by the goals, thoughts and trust that exists around the students, and their capacity for learning. The relationship could be trusting, and built on trust that the students themselves, with an inner drive and in a community, can develop both a positive environment and learning by supporting and encouragement. The opposite is created if there is confidence that the students themselves are learning but must be controlled, and rewarded. This creates an expected behavior and develops learning but no higher learning (no longer memory of what is learnt) (p. 309-341). Vackestig (2009) findings agree with the previous statement since she found that the students felt disappointed because they felt overlooked by the teacher when the teacher placed the students in work groups. She noticed when she analyzed the materials that the students did not feel safe when working with others of different learning goals other than themselves, this could be underachievers for instance (p.28). Grades as stated by Watson & Battistich (2006) could be one of those factors that caused disappointment in group work placement
and leads to lack of interest, and drive (p. 309-341). This was also explained by the terms social interdependence by Deutsch, 1949, 1962; Johnson, 1970; D. W. Johnson & R. Johnson, 1989. In the next section we will be explaining what the curriculum says about the topics above. It is up to each teacher in accordance with the guidelines to scaffold each individual language growth.

2.4 The Swedish curriculum

According to the guidelines in the compulsory curriculum for the Swedish school system we mean to point out that group work stimulates the accumulated experience and sharing of different experiences that the students may share with each other to develop learning when speaking a foreign language like English. In the ESL classroom they may have different backgrounds but they can through group work extend those experiences with each other and evolve the language together as a group.

One key point the Curriculum (2011) states is that the students should work in order to develop democratic processes and independent thought, it also states that they develop argumentative abilities and this can be easily achieved through group processes with some guidance. “These skills involve understanding spoken and written English, being able to formulate one’s thinking and interact with others in the spoken and written language, and the ability to adapt use of language to different situations, purposes and recipients”(p.32). In the curriculum it states that language development should promote discussions and argumentation for different purposes, as these are tools for creating deeper meaning when learning English. When working with language development and the Swedish curriculum, it touches upon group work as a method but it is the teachers responsibility to construct lesson plans to effectively utilize this successfully. Gibbons (2008) explains in her research article, that Johnston and Hayes (this issue) point out, “that applying a curriculum characterized by intellectual quality it is up to the teacher to understand beforehand what the theoretical understanding is (higher thinking goals are) and how to successfully work with them/this in the classroom practices” (p.156).

Because of the importance put on explicit rules for both ESL learners and group work we found that the management of planning high – cognitive and structured communication growth inside the classroom fell to the teacher. This is why we decided to have a teacher perspective on our research. In the following section we will walk you through the process of our examination.
3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

In this section we will be presenting the different background information about the participants and how we collected the data. Some answers were skipped.

Table 1 presents the years the Swedish survey participants have been working as English teachers in year 4 – 6;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher 1</th>
<th>Teacher 2</th>
<th>Teacher 3</th>
<th>Teacher 4</th>
<th>Teacher 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 6</td>
<td>Teacher 7</td>
<td>Teacher 8 &amp; 9</td>
<td>Teacher 10</td>
<td>Teacher 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows us the location of schools around the country where the teachers work;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>South of Sweden</th>
<th>West of Sweden</th>
<th>East of Sweden</th>
<th>Unspecified location in Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 presents disperse pattern of these teachers among the years 4 – 6;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Year 5</th>
<th>Year 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4, 5 and 6 are organized under the category; group work and language developmental strategies.

We also had a Swedish ESL teacher whom provided us with answers to the detailed questionnaire form we designed from the online survey. She works in south Sweden in an independent school as a middle school teacher, year 4 – 6.
3.2 Qualitative analysis materials

Reinecker and Stray Jørgensen (2013) explain that analyses can be extracted from very small amounts and still be giving a beneficial result, to collect and analyze these results you need to do it in-depth. This is then referred to as qualitative data analyses (p.208). Therefore we will be using a qualitative method in the form of a questionnaire (see Appendix 1), and from those results put together an detailed interview sheet (see Appendix 2) with the themes we want to examine further and get more detailed answers. We have sent out online questionnaires to Swedish ESL teachers in grades 4-6, to be able to find out what part group work plays in the language classroom. The questionnaire we choose to use was from a company called surveymonkey, since this kind of online form offers anonymity for its participants and lets its participants answer directly online without the trouble of sending their answers to emails. We later presented our questionnaire on the social media site Facebook and shared it in an ESL group. In this way we could persuade people into leaving authentic answers. Alvehus (2013) writes that using one single method when working qualitatively is easier to produce data which is simpler to analyze than if you use different methods when collecting the same data from different sources (p.71). They gave us eleven Swedish answers from different parts of Sweden. To try and get a broad perspective for our main study we asked the teachers to give some information about their practice.

- How long have you been an active ESL teacher?
- Where in Sweden do you work?
- What grade do you teach?

We were happy to find that the teachers who answered the initial questionnaires varied in the demographic on all points. As Reinecker and Stray Jørgensen (2013) quantitative analysis is data you can turn in to numbers, quantities and sizes (p.208). Although these numbers are not large enough to be classified as quantitative data, this data is broad enough to spot irregularities or patterns that we then used to make a detailed questionnaire for our three teachers for our comparative study later on. We choose broad and simple statements for our pilot questionnaire to get an overview of what themes and questions that seemed puzzling or gave an odd result. It was
these questions that stood out or did not give a satisfying response, which we choose to dig into further, in our detailed questionnaire sheet for our Swedish ESL teacher.

- How do you as a teacher work with supporting the different levels of learning?
- What kind of groups do you divide the students in, when preparing group assignments?
- What type of scaffolding do you work with when developing the students’ communicative proficiency?

These where our three main questions, these questions are important because they answers our research question. We have since our VFU been wondering how the teachers work with groups and if there is any scaffolding when developing the student’s communicative proficiency.

We had sub-categorized questions as structuring help for the participating teacher. We also tried to make our sub-questions work with each other so that many of the questions answered the same thing only in different ways. Trost (2001) writes about the importance of having a congruency when writing the questions and that means that in the questionnaire you would state many questions with relatively same answers to check for reliability (p.60).

3.3 Ethical considerations

Because we choose to use an online survey data collector, we had to see to the discretion and data preservation since the results must be saved. Therefore the data is stored on the site anonymous and under code lock. Reinecker and Stray Jørgensen (2013) explain that “people, institutions, etc. must be anonymized - unless they do not wish to be anonymized and the student agrees with this wish” (p.218).
4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Statistics

In this section we present the results we gathered during these ten weeks of our study. This section presents the participants whom answered our pilot questionnaire and help structure our detailed questionnaire sheet themes, we started presenting in table 1-3 the different background information about the participants in the pilot. In table 4-9 we are presenting the results. We will also be presenting the detailed questionnaire.

National results from Swedish teachers when asked how they organized their classroom group activities. (Table 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answer</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By placement (next to each other)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By numbers (1...2...3....4....and so on)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students own choice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With the same developmental level</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With different developmental levels</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

On question one in the questionnaire, respondents were asked how they divide the pupils into groups when organizing group activities. The respondents got seven different propositions to choose from. 40% of the respondents choose with the same developmental level, while the rest categories only got 20% at most (table 4).
How often do you use groups when it comes to different linguistic methods, when working with communication in the classroom? *(Table. 5)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>66,67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table.5*

To find out how often teachers use groups when it comes to different linguistic methods when working with communication we gave the teachers five different propositions to choose from, the one that more than 66.67% chose was often, while once a week, seldom and never got 11 % each *(table 5)*. To see if there are any methods involved when planning group work in lesson plan, we made a yes or no question, where 77.77 % respond No, and 22.22 % respond yes *(table 6)*.

Do you use a certain method when planning group work in lesson plan construction? *(Table. 6)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22,22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77,77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table.6*

Table 7 and 8 are categorized under; planning and scaffolding.
What size groups do you usually use when working with group work? *(Table. 7)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pairs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16,67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33,33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five or more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table.7*

To investigate what kind of group sizes the teachers use when working with group work, we made this question to see how big groups they make. And none of the teachers use more than four in each group. Pairs were the most common, which 50 % of the teachers use *(table 7)*. 88, 89 % of the teachers had pupils with different learning levels in their classroom *(table 8).*

77, 78 % of respondents answered that motivation for communication is increased for pupils when they work in groups instead of individual. 22, 22% respond answered that it’s still the same amount as before *(table 9).*

Do you have students in your class with different learning levels? (No disabilities like dyslexia etc.) *(Table. 8)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88,89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Have you noticed that the motivation for communicating increased when working through group work in comparison to individual work? *(Table. 9)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77,78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The same amount as before</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22,22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table.8*

Table 9 and following comments in table 10 are all categorized under; motivation.

In what/which ways have you noticed an increase of motivation? *(Table. 10)*

| O1                             | Jag märker att fler elever är delaktiga och försöker uttrycka sig på engelska när vi arbetar i olika grupper. Samma sak när vi gör olika lekar och spel. |
| O2                             | Eleverna pushar varandra och kan dela med sig av sina kunskaper och erfarenheter på sin egen nivå. |
| O3                             | Eleverna märker att de kan oftast mer än de tror och blir stolta över sina insatser när de märker att de kan göra sig förstådd muntligt och/eller skriftligt. |
After we collected all the information we needed from the survey, we proceeded to make a detailed questionnaire sheet to get more detailed answers. Therefore we contacted a suitable Swedish school in southern Sweden and visited the school to ask if they were interested in co-operating with us in accord with our survey. The Swedish teacher agreed to answer the detailed questionnaire sheet anonymously and let us present the result in this paper. This study is ten weeks long which is not long enough to collect a more in-depth answer to our research question but we have tried to answer from the data we collected, and define what is most important when it comes to the practical work the teacher does in the classroom, and from the theoretical material.

Below we will be presenting the result we collected from the detailed questionnaire.

**Question 1. How do you as a teacher work with supporting the different levels of learning?**

Every student has a working book and a reading book which we use every week. The exercises that are given in the book can both be oral discussions and reading comprehension. If it is listening comprehension the students listen to a conversation and answer questions about the conversation.

Students that need more help to reach their full potential, to reach their goal I usually pair up together so they can get the assignments they need for their level. Stronger students we usually pair up as well so they can get challenges. That’s the best way to work so both the stronger and weaker students learn at their own level.

In this section the teacher write about the way she support the different levels of learning she also write that she pair up the stronger students with the weaker so they can get challenges.

**Question 2. What kind of groups do you divide the students in when preparing group assignments?**
If it is a group assignment that everyone should participate in and learn about it is the best to mix the groups so every group has weak and strong student so they can learn from each other and show their skills.

The size of the group cannot be more than 3-4 students.

When they’re going to present what they have done it’s important to include every student in the presentation so they can show what they have learned and what they know.

In this section the teacher were asked in how big groups she divide the students, and she wrote that the groups cannot be bigger then 3-4 students in each group.

*Question 3. What type of scaffolding do you work with when developing the student’s communicative proficiency?*

Students that are not at the same level as the others get adapted and individual assignments and planning. They use iPads and other resources in school so they can get more help. They have a special teacher as well that comes one time per week for extra support. The assignments that are adapted for them usually contain a lot of pictures so it gets easier to understand. These students work in other rooms so they have it easier concentrating. They need to have more listening comprehension so it gets easier for them to understand.

The teacher writes that she uses iPads and other resources when developing the student’s communicative skills. She also points out that when the students have more listening comprehension exercises it gets easier for them to understand.

*4.2 Our research questions*

In the section below we will be discussing the presented findings from these questionnaires and how these relate to our research questions and the current field of research. We have divided our research findings into different themes to guide the reader through this part of our thesis although the findings are closely knitted together so they do flow into every category. We will be referring henceforth to our chosen teachers as, S for the Swedish teacher. The teachers from our pilot questionnaires will be referred to as O1, O2 and so forth. The research questions we have stated and examined in this paper are:
1. How do ESL teachers in year 4-6 structure group work?

2. Is their structuring of group work in relation to cooperative teaching?

4.3 Group work in the ESL classroom

When comparing our results from the questionnaires we found some interesting similarities. One of these similarities where the optimal number of participants in a group during group exercises. On this particular question our teacher (S) stated that groups of five or higher seldom if never worked out. This was even supported in the pilot study table 7, where the teachers were asked how many participants they usually put together when forming group exercises. 50% answered that the usually used pair groups when working through cooperation activities. The table shows that five or more was the least workable option since nobody worked with that large amount of grouping in active cooperation lessons. Rebecca L Oxford (1997) agrees with the previous statement and stipulates that groups need to be smaller than 7 in size to be able to work effectively, this she points to as one of the guiding principle of the Johnson & Johnson (1997) ground rules which they bring up in their study about cooperative learning with children in year 4 – 6 (p.444).

What size groups do you usually use when working with group work? (Table. 7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pairs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16,67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33,33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five or more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table.7
As Johnson & Johnson (2002) has referred a group work to be the most beneficial for learning it must have a couple of ground stipulations and one of these are positive social interdependence which depends on the teachers’ ability to challenge the group as a whole. Each individual should have a chance to learn together with group peers and a natural support will occur. It is up to the teacher to form groups with different levels so that information is processed at different cognitive levels for all the children in the group (p.95-105). This example of using the ZPD and social learning does not have to be restrained to lower level thinkers, and not teaching higher level thinkers anything, on the contrary. Higher level thinkers often rush through their assignment because of boredom and miss smaller detail, such detail that the lower level thinkers are stuck on and bring into light once again so that the higher level thinkers in the group processes that information anew. We found that this mix does not happen as often as it is theoretically taught in our education. Table 4 asking teachers how they group students show that they rather place students in the same level together rather than mixing them up. The table shows only 20% wanting to mix the levels while 40 % were for putting same level students together.

National results from Swedish teachers when asked how they organized their classroom group activities. (Table. 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answer</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By placement (next to each other)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By numbers (1...2...3....4...and so on)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students own choice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With the same developmental level</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With different developmental levels</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
The Swedish teacher (S) explains why (S) puts the same level together while working but (S) also mixes the groups by different ability occasionally and harnesses their individuality, especially when presenting a task.

If it’s a group assignment that everyone should participate in and learn about it is the best to mix the groups so every group has weak and strong student so they can learn from each other and show their skills (S).

Gibbons (2008) explains that for a language classroom to be motivating and interesting for a group of students a challenging curriculum must be in place. She writes “however, the explicit development of curriculum distinguished by these kinds of activities, in reality it is not a primary focus when program planning for ESL learners. Instead, many programs have been defined by lower level repetitive drill-and-practice activities and a focus on basic grammatical forms excised from authentic contexts of language use” (p. 157). The curriculum explains this as being able to provide “a general but coherent view. The school should stimulate pupils’ creativity, curiosity and self-confidence, as well as their desire to explore their own ideas and solve problems. Pupils should have the opportunity to take initiatives and responsibility, and develop their ability to work both independently and together with others. The school in doing this should contribute to pupils developing attitudes that promote entrepreneurship” (p.11, 12). What we found is that even if a majority of teachers do answer that they have difference in ability in their classroom as shown in table 8 where we asked the teachers the question of difference in ability existed in their classroom, an astounding 88, 89 % answered yes while only 11, 11 % answered that no difference in the classroom occurred. We believe that this is because teachers do not get enough practical training in how to form groups from the ground rules. These ground rules are essential in any conflict resolution or group work practice since it is a useful skill to have even in daily life. It promotes higher reasoning skills and higher cognitive thinking outside the subject which is applicable when learning and developing in any classroom. A similar conclusion was found (Gibbons, 2008 p. 157). Do you have students in your class with different learning levels? (No disabilities like dyslexia etc.) (Table. 8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>11,11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8

4.4 Group work as a developmental tool for cooperation and communication

M. Martin Beltrán (2012) conducted a one yearlong study in a bilingual Spanish/English community, where she observed a fifth grade English class when using a communitive cooperative method when learning and developing language meaning in during English classes. She collected and analyzed observations, interviews, field notes, recordings etc. What she found was that the children helped each other find meaning and being able to cooperate in higher word analysis activities than they would have on their own. Because the children each had different funds of knowledge, this meaning their life experiences and prior knowledge and their current level of abstract thinking processes, to work from, which they could help each other construct higher reasoning skills and meta-analysis skills when working with wordplay. She also found that with the right scaffolding questions from the teacher the students would push each other’s ZPD levels and open up a greater curiosity in each other about the task at hand. This is explained in the theoretical literature section as Vygotsky’s social process when learning through group work and language development. What we found when looking at our results were that the teachers were in agreement when using this kind of group work as a tool since it helps develop reasoning skills in every student, strong and weak alike.

Teacher (S) uses collaboration as a scaffolding tool for students whom need extra support in the normal book exercises so that they all can work at their own pace but still become challenged.

Students that need more help to reach their full potential, to reach their goal I usually pair up together so they can get assignments they need for their level. Stronger students we usually pair up as well so they can get challenges. That’s the best way to work so that both the stronger and weaker students learn at their own level (S).

This was also supported in our pilot study where one of the Swedish teachers (O1) argued that:
Jag märker att fler elever är delaktiga och försöker uttrycka sig muntligt på engelska när vi arbetar i olika grupper. Samma sak när vi gör olika lekar och spel (O1). [I notice that more of the students are participating and trying to express themselves in the target language when we work in different groups. The same thing applies when we are working through different activities like games.] (Our translation).

Another teacher from the Swedish pilot study agreed on the topic that group work is an effective scaffolding tool when developing language abilities, the teacher (O2) explains that:

Eleverna pushar varandra och kan dela med sig av sina kunskaper och erfarenheter på sin egen nivå (O2). [The students push each other and shares from their own knowledge funds at their own level.] (Our translation).

We found that teachers do use group work in the ESL classroom when communicative exercises are in practice as shown in table 5 when asked if they use group work when working with linguistic strategies in the communicative lessons they answered often 66,67 % while 11,11% (categorical) each answered that they never, seldom or once a week only used the practice but when it comes to following up on individual accomplishments it is hard for the teacher to perceive which students that slip through and if any of them end up doing all the work.

How often do you use groups when it comes to different linguistic methods, when working with communication in the classroom? (Table. 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>66,67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11,11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teacher (S) answered that she mixed up students when they were allowed to present their findings only.
When they’re going to present what they have done it’s important to include every student in the presentation so they can show what they have learned and what they know (S).

### 4.5 Motivation and active participation through group work

M. Martin Beltrán (2012) agrees with what we found in table 9, where 77, 78 % answered yes to the question of whether motivation for communication increased while working through group work in comparison to individual work, and claims that scaffolding raises active participation amongst students. She encouraged the students by making them connect the English words with the linguistic funds they already had in Spanish. This made the students more encouraged and supportive when they worked together. This is supported by Watson & Battistch (2006) whom explains in our theoretical literature section that the environment and culture in the classroom created by the teacher is dependent and influenced by the goals, thoughts and trust that exists around the students, and their capacity for learning. The relationship could be trusting, and built on trust that the students themselves, with an inner drive and in a community, can develop both a positive environment and learning by supporting and encouragement.

Have you noticed that the motivation for communicating increased when working through group work in comparison to individual work? *(Table. 9)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Teacher answers</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The same amount as before</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table.9*
Teacher (O3) from the Swedish pilot study explains what they found when they worked through co-operative methods in the language class:

Eleverna märker att de kan oftast mer än de tror och blir stolta över sina insatser när de märker att de kan göra sig förstådd muntligt och/eller skriftligt (O3). [The students notice that they know more than the think initially and gain confidence and pride with their own efforts when they notice they can make themselves understood orally and/or by writing.] (Our translation).

We found that two other teachers (O5, O6) commented on the same point as teacher O3 when they stated the benefits when working co-operational in the ESL classroom, here is what they commented:

Alla vågar prata, de frågar varandra mer, de behöver inte ensamma visa vad de kan (O5). [Everyone dares speak up, they ask each other more, and they do not have to be alone in proving their ability.] (Our translation).

Svaga elever får mycket kamratstöd, starka elever får visa vad de kan. Gruppen vill att produkten ska bli bra (O6). [Weaker students get a lot of peer support, stronger students get to show their abilities. The group wants the end product to be great.] (Our translation).

Christie & Martin (1997) also point out that if the ground rules where more specific, motivating and scaffolding it would increase the students’ knowledge and make them more interested and motivated, not only for group based lesson but for individual lessons as well. They also claim that the best way to develop through co-operation is through a balanced teacher – led, and whole class activities with groups that are more structured.

N. Mercer, R. Wegerif & L. Dawes (1999) conducted a ten week twin study with four target and four control fifth grade classes. Four classes participated in a TRAC program created for this study. The TRAC (‘talking groups’ for the collaborative activities) program is a computer based program which has collaborative tasks on it. The aim of the study was to evaluate and develop a teaching program for scaffolding use, to test children’s effective use of language as a tool for reasoning and co-operation. This was done by grouping the children in work groups of three and the same was done in the control classes. Because they wanted a stable environment for their results they only collected data thru recordings, observations and the control group got to use the specially-designed computer-based activities also, for later comparison. They found that the use of patterns motivated the children to interact and held the children’s interest over a longer period of time than the controlled class would. This is also something that Johnson &Johnson (1999)
when they explain that there exists positive social interdependence, which are tightly knit to the interaction processes in group work. The description of positive social interdependence is when the individual student feeling that he or she can only obtain their target goal if and only if their peers (in the same group) can obtain their goals; this leads to the promoting of each other when working on a common goal.
5. Conclusion

This study showed that even if group work is the optional teaching practice for developing communicative proficiency, it is not a common practice since it is hard to assess the individual progress of students in a language class.

This did show us that it is common to use group exercises when increasing language development but we found that the teachers seldom used the reference of theoretical base behind how to make group work optional for the ZPD socio-cultural practices. Our conclusion is that group work could be seen as scaffolding when students are co-operating with each other. We believe that the students are also assisting each other which could be beneficial for language development.

We noticed that motivation for participating in linguistic activities, like co-operation talk episodes, increased when working with peers through co-operational exercises through group work.

We found ourselves limited by the amount of time given to perform actual data recovery since this study is no more than ten weeks long we did not have time to collect all the answers we could have in, if it were a six months long study.

This study has given us more knowledge about the understanding of what classifies group work and how this relates to language exercises in the ESL classroom, but for future research we would have liked to compare why these factors that we found wanting existed, why does not bigger groups than four work in the classrooms? It had been interesting to get more of an international perspective for the study by interviewing teachers from different countries and comparing the different curriculums when working in the ESL classroom with group work.
6. References


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______benefits.html


7. Appendix

Appendix 1 – Web based survey
Gruppartiets roll på språkutvecklingen - Examensarbete

Allmän information

M. C.


Vi avslutar nyttigt.

Och nu, fortsätter:

1. Hur många är det som demokratiseras?

2. Vilken roll har de demokratiserat?

3. Vilken orsak utvecklas du?
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3

4. Hur sätter du ihop olika grupper?
   - Grupper
   - Samma vägren ort
   - Det som är avstår
   - Det som är betyg
   - Det som är grupper
   - Omgit av något
   - Kompliserade som du väljer ut

5. Hur oftast använder du grupper när det kommer till språksättning och t.ex. med elevar

   Uttryck som baserar sig på kommunikationsutveckling
   - SBI
   - Gata
   - En eller vissa
   - Sällskap
   - Häng

Next
Appendix 2 – Written interview sheet

Good Day,
We are two teachers in training at a Swedish University and currently working on our thesis about language development and the role group work plays in the communicative classroom. This questionnaire has some guided questions about our current theme and we would be thankful if you answered them to the best of your knowledge since it will help us immensely. We are currently making a comparison study between three ESL classrooms around the world. If you have more answers on the subject you are free to write and discuss these points as they can greatly add to our thesis, your answers will be anonymous and your personal information will not be given in our paper without your written consent. We hope you find this subject as interesting as we do. Thank you dearly for your cooperation. Sincerely Patricia and Oskar.

- **How do you as a teacher work with supporting the different levels of learning?**

  *What kind of exercises do you give to your students? This could be in form of guided talk (students talking in a group with help from the teacher) or a specific task to open up conversation between the parties (students) like the audio lingual method – direct method/natural method (students refrain from using their first language and only speaks in the foreign language).*

  *Do you think of the different levels of language development of your students when planning a group work situation and how do you work to fit these levels together so that each student reaches their maximum level of potential? Do you pair of weaker students with stronger or pair of stronger students with each other? How do you argument for what is the best development situation when working with groups and language development?*

- **What kind of groups do you divide the students in when preparing group assignments?**

  *Do you usually group student in pairs or do you use study groups (the larger kind) and how do you effectively use these group sizes to encourage language development?*
How do you notice if the student/students have gained further language proficiency from the group work?

Is group work often spontaneous or do you plan it in your lesson plan? If so do you look or consult your fellow teachers for new methods/theories to work from?

What benefits have you encountered when working with group activities in students communication proficiency?

Have you had any setbacks when working with this type of work? What type of student does not fit this type of working arrangement according to your experience?

How do you as a teacher motivate the less active students in a group? Do you teach conflict resolution or do you step in in all the conflicts as a leader and resolve the difference?

- What type of scaffolding do you work with when developing the student’s communicative proficiency?

Gibbons refers to children’s culture as being one of the prominent scaffolding tools in the ESL classroom, this because the subjects and language use becomes of greater importance to them relevant and recognizable to their life.

Is this something you have encountered when working with ESL students? And if so how do you find this working in the classroom? Is it beneficial or a hindrance when planning your lesson? Do you have different scaffolding in place so as to motivate the different levels within your classroom (picture, wordlists and etc.)?