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An Explorative Study of English Learning in Second Language Classrooms
-Teachers’ and pupils’ perspectives on language learning-

En explorativ studie om andraspråksinlärning i engelskklassrum
-Pedagogers och elevers perspektiv på språkinlärning-

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Abstract

This study looks at how pupils perceive and their learning of the English language, juxtaposed to what the teachers believe about the pupils' learning. Sometimes, it is taken for granted that the methods and the way a teacher goes about teaching pupils is the best way to go about a lesson. However, research shows that pupils tend to have a learning style preference which means that a method that works for one pupil is not necessarily the one that works for other pupils. The focus in this study is on how pupils feel about their learning and their learning environments as they give suggestions on improvements they wish to make. The teachers also discuss means they believe work best for their pupils and what they think their pupils feel about their learning environments. The study is an explorative one and was carried out through the use of questionnaires with open-ended questions. The questionnaires were distributed to pupils and their teachers in three English classes at one upper secondary school. In conclusion, it is discussed that for any learning to take place, there has to be a mutual understanding of the learning process. This study brings to light that pupils have learning preferences, therefore teachers have to be aware of these in order to facilitate the learning process.

Keywords
Second language learning, classroom discourse, classroom improvement, second language learning environment, controlled processes, Zone of Proximal Development, Interactive Perspective, Cognitive Perspective.
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An Explorative Study of English Learning in Second Language Classrooms

-Teachers’ and pupils’ perspectives on language learning-

“Learners’ perception of their own strengths and weaknesses as language learners can influence the use they make of opportunities available for language learning and the priorities they set for themselves”

(Richards and Lockhart, 1994, 56)

INTRODUCTION

It is probably not unusual that while pupils may have their own view and understanding of their learning process, teachers most likely also have their own picture of how pupils best learn languages, of course with the help of the curriculum and syllabus. However, as right as we may assume the teachers are about their pupils’ learning, perhaps the pupils in their own right also know, to a certain extent, how they best learn languages. In connection to the pupils’ perception of how they best learn, Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada state in How Languages are Learned (2003), that “learners have clear preference for how they go about learning new material” (58). Furthermore, “[w]hen learners and teachers meet for the first time, they may bring with them different expectations concerning not only the learning process in general, but also concerning what will be learned in a particular course and how it will be learned” (Richards, Jack C. and Lockhart, Charles. 34). In addition, Lightbown and Spada go on to explain that the term ‘learning style’ “has been used to describe an individual’s natural habitual, and preferred way of absorbing processing, and retaining new information and skills” (58). Hence, a “learner’s preference for learning, whether due to their learning style or to their beliefs about how languages are learned, will influence the kinds of strategies they choose in order to learn new material” (59). It is of great interest to find out if there is a correlation between teachers’ and pupils’ understanding of how pupils best learn.

Purpose

With reference to the school curriculum, it is stated in the policy document that:

an important task for the school is to provide a general but coherent view. It should also provide pupils with opportunities for taking initiatives and responsibilities as well as creating the preconditions for developing their ability to work independently and solve
The focus in this study will be on the teachers’ and the pupils’ understandings of when learning and teaching environments best contribute to the pupils’ learning of the English language in a second language classroom. Furthermore the study will look at how the pupils perceive their learning methods and how they feel about it. Finally, comparisons of possible discrepancies as well as similarities between teachers’ and pupils’ perceptions will be made.

**Previous research and theories**

The theories that are highlighted in this study have been helpful in explaining and analysing of the data collected from the teachers and pupils. In the discussion section below, the theories are connected to the pupils’ and the teachers’ perceptions of their learning environment. The socio-cultural theory provides a framework for analysing classroom interaction. One of its main principles concerns cognitive development, which entails that learning originates in a social context, such as the language classroom (Nassaji, 2000, 243). The cognitive development principle further draws attention to the fact that through dialogue, teachers can provide learners with effective assistance that will enable them to perform on a higher level than they would otherwise do (Nassaji, 243). Since English is nowadays considered and treated as Sweden’s second language (also known as L2), in a sense that it is one of the core subjects for admission into higher education, it is thus not unlikely that higher demands on both the competence in the pupils’ learning as well as the teachers’ competence in teaching of the language is bound to gradually increase. This means that, in order for L2 learning to be successful, good teaching will cease to be the only device or tool required for imparting and acquiring knowledge. As stated by Marta Antón (1999), learning is also dependant on the social environment and calls for an active role for the learner’s own input in the learning process in the classroom (305).

Another theory that encourages the pupils’ own active involvement as well as the teacher’s creativity in the learning process is known as The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined as “the difference between the child’s developmental level as determined by the independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with the more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, 86). Two other theories that argue for this phenomenon are The
Interactive Perspective and The Cognitive Perspective. According to the Interactive perspective, “learning a new language is a function of social and meaningful interaction; the degree of language learning success depends on the quality and type of the interaction between the learner and the teacher” (Nassaji, 243). In this view, language learning is enhanced “particularly when they (the learners) negotiate toward mutual comprehension of each other’s message meaning” (243).

The Cognitive Perspective conceptualises second language learning as a complex cognitive skill, meaning that acquisition involves several cognitive stages. Two distinguished cognitive stages in all skill acquisition processes are controlled processes and automatic processes. According to this theory, any complex cognitive skill is first learned through frequent use of controlled processes which then become automatic, attention-free processes after frequent use (Nassaji, 243). In short, this theory entails that “controlled processes are not yet learned processes and remain under the attentional control of the learner; they usually require a large amount of processing capacity and more time for activation. Automatic processes, on the other hand, are quick and demand relatively little processing” (243). With this information in mind, it makes it easier for one to deduce what process is going on at a certain point in time in a particular pupil and what learner levels the pupils may be at.

In order to make the reading of this study more straightforward, below are some of the key words that have been used in the study. Second language learning (L2) - Second language acquisition, or SLA, is of great relevance to this study as it is a process by which pupils learn languages, in addition to their native tongue(s). The term second language is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood (including what may be the third or subsequent language learned). The language to be learned is often referred to as the target language or L2; SLA is sometimes called L2A, for L2 acquisition.

Classroom discourse in terms of semantics, is communication in linguistic units composed of several sentences — in other words, conversations, arguments or speeches. The study of discourses, or of language used by members of a language community, is known as discourse analysis. It looks at both language form and function, and includes the study of both spoken/signed interaction and written texts. It is a cross-disciplinary field, originally developed from sociolinguistics, anthropology, sociology and social psychology.
In addition, Personal Learning Environments are systems that help learners take control of and manage their own learning. This includes providing support for learners to:

- set their own learning goals
- manage their learning; managing both content and process
- communicate with others in the process of learning and thereby achieve learning goals

Important concepts in PLEs include the integration of both formal and informal learning episodes into a single experience, the use of social networks that can cross institutional boundaries, and the use of networking protocols (Peer-to-Peer, web services, and syndication) to connect arrange of resources and systems within a personally-managed space.

Judging from observations made at our in-school practice, many decisions about the pupils’ learning and social environments are taken mainly by teachers and the pupils almost never get to express their feelings and opinions about their learning styles with regard to the above mentioned concepts. Therefore, it is interesting to find out how the pupils perceive their learning of English. Hence, the purpose of this study is to find out whether or not there are any misunderstandings between what the teachers believe to be the best way for their pupils to learn English and what the pupils themselves believe. The study will also give some insight into what the teachers as well as the pupils believe will improve their overall situation in the English classroom. With this information perhaps teachers and other interested parties, will find it easier to understand and take into consideration at least in part or as a whole, some of the suggestions that are highlighted in the study. The information obtained from doing this study will hopefully provide resources that are conducive to successful and attractive social learning environments and thereby improve pupils’ learning of English in a second language classroom.

METHOD

The study entails two sets of questionnaires and both questionnaires are comprised of three parts. These parts reflect on the social learning environment and classroom discourse, (as in composition of a classroom and methods of learning and teaching). The first questionnaire targets the teachers, while the second one targets the pupils. Before handing out the questionnaires, permission from the principal was sought and permission slips were handed out to the pupils for their parents’ consent. The questionnaires were handed out to the three
English classes and to two teachers of English at secondary level and the collection of data were done anonymously.

The questions are deliberately open-ended in character in order to promote individually specific descriptions and reasonings about how the pupils and teachers feel. Questionnaires were used for this study because according to Robson, questionnaires are the best choice in order to find out what the respondents do in private, think, feel or believe (Robson, Colin 2002, 224). Through this method, we aimed to generate enough relevant and valid data for analysis. Robson further adds that although questionnaires can interchangeably be used for interviews, it is usually novice researchers that tend to use questionnaires as this is the simplest way of obtaining data (238). However, by using open-ended questions, we avoided questions that would result in leading to short answers. Robson argues that when it comes to questionnaires, if filled in at home, “there is essentially no control and no way of knowing whether the person completing the questionnaire is who they say they are” (239). For this reason, the pupils had a time frame of one hour to answer the questions and this was done in school.

With regard to questionnaires, different researchers feel differently about when to use and when not to use this method of obtaining data. However, Dick Allwright and Kathleen M. Bailey (1999) state that:

> the second way, the obvious alternative to direct observation, is simply to ask, to give people an opportunity to report for themselves what has happened to them and what they think about it. The traditional way of getting such ‘self-report’ data is to conduct surveys, usually through interviews or by written questionnaires (4).

Allwright and Bailey further claim that the language in the questionnaire should be appropriate in order to match the level of the target respondent’s language proficiency. However, other researchers such as Bo Johansson and Per Olov Svedner (1998) express less confidence in the usage of questionnaires stating that questionnaires work best if one intends to research the connection between factual information such as age, sex, earlier education or work experience, i.e., questions which are easy to formulate into elaborate answers* (28).

* Researchers’ own translation from Swedish.
Questionnaires seemed the most feasible method for this study given the time constraints and the above mentioned circumstances at the in-school practice schools.

After collecting the data, it was analysed and then presented according to what the majority of pupils as well as teachers said about their learning situation. The results were presented just as the pupils and teachers expressed them in the answers. Naturally, interpretations of the data are pointed out from the researchers’ point of view as well as with the help of secondary sources in the form of literature, in order to get a clearer picture of what the results arrived at. The obtaining of diverse answers through already provided questions allowed more respondents to fill in the questionnaires in a short period of time and the interpreting of the data was less time-consuming when it came to analysing the responses.

Limitations and objectivity
As a researcher, it is important to be critical to the method used and also to how the analysis is planned and conducted. Therefore, it should be pointed out that the interpretation of the results in this study cannot and should not be regarded as the only possible or correct explanation for the outcome. According to Robson (2004), objectivity is undermined when only a few researchers carry out research (239). Therefore, due to the limited number of resources available for usage in re-analysing the work and confirming or providing an alternative result analysis and discussion, our result should be regarded as being only one of the many possible interpretations of the outcome. It should also be pointed out that the study was carried out at only one school in Helsingborg; therefore the result cannot be seen as being representative of all schools but just the one that was researched.
RESULTS

In this results section, data that was collected from the pupils is presented in such a way that
the responses that are dealt with are those that repeatedly came up in the answers from both
the pupils and the teachers. The subtitles below refer to the questions in the questionnaires
handed out to the pupils and the teachers but they are rephrased here and appear in the same
order, as in the original questionnaires; however some questions were taken away due to lack
of relevance. In this results section, statements that are written in cursive letters are direct
translations of statements made by the teachers and pupils.*

Pupils’ Views

1. Pupils’ experience of English as a subject

The pupils clearly expressed that English is an important subject. One pupil wrote: that
English is as important as Swedish because it is the language I normally use when we travel
outside the country. Although the majority of the pupils stated that grammar rules and
spellings were very difficult, almost all the pupils felt that English was a fun subject and
important to have as a second language. One pupil pointed out that: English is important
because it is a means of communication on an international level and useful for the future and
for higher education.

2. Study techniques

The study techniques that most of the pupils stated as being helpful for their learning were
repetition of the work learned, carefully listening to audio texts and practicing speaking
mainly with family and friends. One pupil wrote: I learn English through listening to music,
watching movies and sometimes even through singing. Another pupil stated that: language is
easiest and best learned through actively reading, speaking as well a listening. To increase
their vocabulary, the pupils stated that they read books and looked up words they did not
understand from different texts. A pupil stated that: I usually ask someone to test my
knowledge on what I have learned while another pupil said that I have only to pay attention to
the teacher in class and I learn in that manner. One other wrote: I learn to spell by
pronouncing the word as it is spelt.

* All translations are made as close as possible to the original language of the questionnaire and the teachers’ and
pupils’ answers. The original language is Swedish.
4, 5. Advantages and disadvantages of group work

Most of the pupils stated that it was very rewarding to work in groups because they could share ideas with one another. A pupil explained that: *through working in groups, I can learn how to create dialogues, share knowledge as well as look at the work from different angles.* Learning to cooperate, discussing as well as expressing oneself were other advantages brought up. Group work was experienced as being less stressful, comfortable and good practice in presenting one’s work and ideas to others. When it came to disadvantages, one pupil stated that: *working in groups allows only those that are out-spoken to express themselves, while those that are introverted are left out, not getting or taking the chance to contribute.*

A pupil stated that: *group work tends to cause competitiveness among pupils in such a way that everyone in the group wants their opinion to be the one that is picked and considered as being the correct opinion.* Some pupils expressed discontent when it came to group work, mentioning that unless the group constellation was made up of pupils on the same level of proficiency, some pupils did not participate adequately and thereby tended to get credit for something that they did not contribute to. One pupil wrote: *I find group work irritating because I am forced to work with people that I may not get along with or only with pupils that have different views to my own about many things.*

The responses on advantages as well as disadvantages of group work were equally distributed. Some pupils argued that it was important to learn how to compromise; therefore group work was important. A pupil wrote that: *pupils learn from each other when they worked in groups.* Another wrote: *it is embarrassing to speak English with other pupils that one is not close to.* This made it difficult to concentrate for those individuals that preferred to work individually and required them to constantly adjust their opinions to those of the others. The pupils argued that the results from group work tended to depend on many factors. If the person who dominated the time taken talking was positively contributing to the work then the result was good but if most of the time was spent negotiating what opinions and ideas were to be representative of the group’s work, then the outcome was less positive.

8. How the teachers help improve vocabulary

Most pupils stated that their teachers had suggested to them that the best ways to improve their vocabulary were by reading different texts and books. One pupil mentioned that: *through watching television and listening to music, I learn new words which I then looked up in the*
dictionary. Looking up keywords from textbooks in the dictionary or simply guessing the meaning of the word through its context, were just some of the suggestions of ways they learned vocabulary. A pupil also wrote that: *it is important for the teacher to write the words or sentences on the whiteboard, as this helps me to remember the words.* The pupils also felt that working with authentic texts and repeating the new words in their own sentences were other ways the teachers had suggested. In concretely stating how the teachers helped the pupils improve their vocabulary, one pupil wrote that: *my teachers tend to write the difficult words on the whiteboard; that way, I can remember.*

9. Atmosphere and cohesion among the pupils and the teachers
The pupils expressed that their teachers had patience with them. The pupils felt that the atmosphere with their teachers was good most of the time but they did not like it when the teachers made them do what the pupils did not like, such as reading in front of the whole class. One other pupil mentioned that: *the teachers’ patience is sometimes taken for granted in such a way that some pupils have a tendency to be disruptive in class.* A few pupils also stated that it was negative when the teachers focused on the same group of pupils while they ignored the rest of the class. One pupil wrote: *I have trouble with understanding the teacher when he/she speaks English.* Perhaps meaning that they were unable to follow the discussion and felt lost. Another setback according to the pupils was that there were not many pupils that were willing or felt comfortable speaking in class. This made the lessons boring in that it was the same people that contributed in the discussions all the time. In general, the pupils felt that the classroom atmosphere was good and the pupils were cooperative to a certain extent. One girl reckoned that: *Boys are usually disruptive.* However, the majority of the pupils wrote: *the atmosphere is calm and collected and the majority of the pupils are interested in the English subject.*

10. Things that do not work so well in the English classroom
According to the pupils, comprehension was difficult most of the time. If the teacher talked too fast or not clearly enough, most of the pupils did not understand what the teacher meant. Following instructions in English was also perceived as being difficult. When the pupils were asked to work in groups, some of them were too chatty so that the class soon became disorderly. One pupil claimed that: *when I am feeling anxious about the lesson, I do not appreciate that the teacher picks me to give an answer.* Some pupils also disliked that some other pupils laughed at those who made mistakes either in pronunciation or grammar in the
spoken language. Some pupils expressed that they did not like grammar lessons because the grammar rules were too difficult.

11. What the pupils enjoy most about their English language and learning environment

At the school in which the questionnaires were handed out, the English classes had special rules allowing the pupils to listen to music while they did their class work. The pupils expressed a great deal of appreciation for this rule. One said: *I am very happy about the very big whiteboard we have in class.* Another pupil wrote: *I am happy about the nice classroom furniture which we have at school, because it is very comfortable.* The pupils expressed gratitude for the large classrooms enabling them personal space. The class size (number or pupils) in the classes were also small/minimal allowing the pupils to get enough attention from their teachers. One pupil added that: *the teachers’ positive attitude is encouraging to the pupils.* Large educative maps and posters on the walls were useful and the pupils were content with them. Another pupil wrote: *I am happy about the accessibility of study materials such as good interesting books and CDs.*

The pupils also had the freedom to choose where they would like to sit. The working styles also differed from pupil to pupil because pupils were allowed to decide what to work on and how they wanted to go about it. Therefore, the pupils showed appreciation for the individual work that they did in those classes. Furthermore, one pupil stated that: *our teachers are very friendly, helpful and willing to take time to explain to the pupils until they understood.* The pupils also said that the class dynamics were good in that the pupils were friendly to each other. The third and final rule they had and one which the pupils were positive towards was one which allowed them to eat fruit in class and bring drinking water with them. They also expressed happiness over the fact that they had plenty of fresh air in their classrooms.

12. What the pupils would like to improve in their learning environment

Most pupils would like to have more break time between the long lessons they have. Some of them would also like to work more in groups. They also felt that they could use more exercises and work more with keywords. To improve the environment so that all the pupils could feel comfortable participating in class discussion was brought up by the pupils as a desire. One pupil wrote: *I would prefer to work in pairs rather than in larger groups.* Some pupils stated that they preferred more individual work. A small number of the pupils stated that they felt that the classes were too noisy and would therefore like to improve that. Another
pupil also pointed out that: *because the teachers are very friendly and not strict, the pupils tend to act less respectfully to the teachers as well as to other pupils.* Another group of pupils suggested that they would like to see a minimization and alternation of the usage of textbooks. Finally, the pupils reckoned that they would like to see more usage of the English language in the classroom, meaning that all the explanations and discussions should be done in English.

13. What the pupils felt they could do to influence and help improve their proficiency in English

The majority of the pupils stated that they usually lacked concentration during the lessons. Therefore this was one area where they needed improvement. One pupil wrote: *I would like to develop a habit of reading more books and practice speaking English with others.* Another wrote: *I would simply like to develop a positive attitude towards learning English, especially when it comes to learning the grammar rules.* Another pupil stated: *I could take more initiative and be a bit more responsible for my own learning and actively do something about it.* Some pupils reckoned that they could find more opportunities to get exposure to authentic study materials and opportunities to speak English. Some said they simply would like to develop courage to participate in the classroom discussions and ask questions if they did not understand something. Another pupil said: *I could use a plan of setting individual goals and take their work seriously.* One other pupil mentioned that: *I would improve my language if I had opportunities to write more letters, postcards and short texts.* A few pupils said they could improve their language, if they were able to watch more films.

The two teachers’ views

1. The teachers’ assumptions on how pupils feel about their English lessons

The teachers believed that the pupils are enthusiastic to learn grammar, vocabulary and to speak English during classes. They also felt that the pupils seemed to actually learn something, appreciated the freedom of choice and that the pupils were mostly involved and eager to learn. As one teacher put it: *it seems as if the pupils find grammar instructions troublesome to deal with and comprehend.*

4, 5. The teachers’ views on group work

One teacher stated that: *group work can be considered as a forum which functions in favour of the pupils’ interaction with and learning from each other.* This forum provided and
 allowed pupils to dare express themselves more. On the other hand, the teachers believed that group work was not suited for everybody because some pupils tended to lean back, neglecting the work and letting one of the other pupils do it instead. This teacher also wrote that: *when working in groups the pupils sometimes take advantage of not being controlled and use that chance to talk about other things in Swedish when the teacher was not there to listen.*

8. **Helping the pupils to improve their English vocabulary**

By advising and encouraging the pupils to look up words, to use crosswords, to draw their own illustrations to keywords and to create their own sentences, the teachers tried to help the pupils improve their English vocabulary. The teachers expressed eagerness in assisting the pupils to develop their English vocabulary, thus they gave words from each chapter they went through and used literature which was easy to read. One teacher wrote: *I consciously use English all the time in order to promote the learning of new vocabulary and at the same time to fortify already acquired words.*

9. **Views on classroom dynamics and atmosphere**

The teachers thought that the atmosphere in the classrooms was quiet, calm and harmonious and one teacher pointed out that he/she enjoyed teaching his/her class. Another teacher wrote that: *classroom dynamic is good overall, but that the girls were in favour of separate girls’ and boys’ classes.* This could be due to the fact that most girls felt that the classroom dynamics were sometimes subdued by unnecessary comments, which the teacher emphasised as not being acceptable.

10. **How the pupils are able to affect their own English language acquisition**

In order for the pupils to affect their own English language acquisition the teachers thought it important for the pupils to be active in class, they need to take initiative and think about their usage of English in their spare time. One teacher emphasised the significance of the pupils’ demands on him/her as a teacher stating that: *pupils tend to ask questions if unsure or if they would like to affect the content of the lessons or the homework.* The teacher hinted that the pupils should always think of looking up words that they did not know. Another teacher suggested that the: *pupils should talk English a lot, listen to the English language and learn new words.* To continue, the teachers advised the pupils to watch English films with English subtitles, to read English books and to write different kinds of texts in English.
Methods, ideas and constellations used to promote second language acquisition

The teachers have tried working with films and working in the traditional way that is, with workbooks, activity books and group work. Apart from learning only the basic knowledge of grammar, one teacher tried to get the pupils to write and speak English during each and every lesson. This same teacher claimed that: **writing and speaking were the two abilities the pupils needed to practice the most, since listening and reading, to a certain extent were abilities that were more included in their spare time and daily routines.**

**DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

In the study findings, it can be perceived that there is an element of great interest for the English subject among the teachers as well as the pupils. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that the English language is widely used in Sweden. To a certain extent, the pupils indicate a clear understanding of what the importance of English is and of what the advantages of learning it are. It can also be pointed out that the pupils’ perceptions of how they learn are not at all that different from that of the teachers’. There appears to be a mutual understanding between the teachers and the pupils, regarding the relevance of the English language in Sweden today. This can be seen as an advantage in both the learning and teaching processes, as it can make the learning process easier.

The pupils believe English is a fun subject and very valid to learn as a second language. The pupils regard English useful for the future, for higher studies, for communication at an international level and as the language mainly spoken when going abroad. These factors brought up by the pupils correlate well with what is mentioned in the Swedish curriculum. The Swedish curriculum claims that the school and the education taking place there are supposed to function as preparations for future life, for further studies, for work and for social life (Skolverket, 12). One can distinguish that there are various ways of looking at the English language and this is because English represents different things to different pupils due to the various contacts the pupils have had with the language and its speakers (Richards and Lockhart, 32).

The teachers suggest that in order for the pupils to affect their English learning they ought to be active in class and take initiatives. Since English is their second language it does not necessarily mean that they are able to or willing to interact the way they may do in a Swedish
class. Considering this, it might take more effort and time for the students to dare express themselves in English or to take initiatives in the classroom. As indicated earlier in the result part, some pupils said that they feel uneasy participating due to the classroom dynamics. Therefore, one should not consider or interpret the pupils lack of participation in this case as laziness or indifference, because “[l]earning a second language takes them back to rudimentary concerns of confidence, assertion and the need for social intercourse” (Green, 7).

As for the teachers it is crucial to bear in mind, as mentioned earlier in the introduction that “[l]earners’ preferences for learning, whether due to their learning styles or to their beliefs about how languages are learned, will influence the kinds of strategies they choose in order to learn new material” (Lightbown & Spada, 59). With this in mind and also considering the awareness of the individual learning styles this enables teachers to plan the content and performance in class to suit each and every individual in the best way possible. According to the Swedish curriculum this is a clearly stated aim (Lpo 94, 6).

In addition to the importance of pupils’ degree of participation and ability to take initiatives, one teacher points out that it is important for the pupils to reflect on their usage of English in their spare time, since this can be regarded as a means for affecting the pupils’ own learning. The latter claim can be correlated with the belief that growth of consciousness closely corresponds to the growth of mental development, meaning that “[i]f the intellectual powers are to develop, the child must gain a measure of control over his own thinking and he cannot control it while he remains unaware of it” (Green, 33). To support this it is further argued that “[k]nowledge of strategies is important, because the greater awareness you have of what you are doing, if you are conscious of the process underlying the learning that you are involved in, then learning will be more effective” (Nunan, 171).

By consciously reflecting on their own learning the pupils can affect their learning actively outside of school. The knowledge acquired in their spare time is advocated to be beneficial to the pupils’ means of acquiring and learning the language while at school. Hence, in accordance with this idea, the teacher seems to be aware of or at least possess a certain knowledge that could be of great help to the pupils on their way towards affecting their own learning. To conclude, “success in education arises when there is a sustained and fruitful interaction between “school knowledge”, which is formalised according to the conventions of educational and scientific culture, and “action knowledge”, which we acquire simply by living” (Green, 33).
In his book *Investigating Classroom Discourse*, Steve Walsh points out that “in all contexts, language is used as the vehicle for communication and as the conduit through which opinions, feelings, emotions concerns are expressed and information, goods and services are transacted”(16). Although the learning tactics and experiences of English vary greatly among the pupils, their aims and goals are set similarly. Almost all of the pupils’ familiarity with the English language is motivated by an interest in the language due to its relevance in their surroundings.

From the pupils’ attitudes, one can deduce that due to the abundant exposure to English through different media, a great deal of adaptation takes place. This implies that the exchange of cultural features which results when groups come into continuous first hand contact takes place. However, contemporary acculturation theories involve multidimensional approaches that place the native culture as well as the foreign culture on different but parallel levels. This still allows an individual to maintain their culture of origin while adopting characteristics from other cultures (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acculturation). With the pupils’ extensive exposure to the outside world through travel and media, it is no wonder that the pupils realise and experience the need to learn English as their second language. In other words, the majority of the pupils feel comfortable with the English language and thus want to make it a part of their language system in order to fit in with a phenomenon they believe is obvious and necessary for communication with the rest of the world.

According to the pupils’ views when it comes to classroom interaction, group work and learning, there is a distinct split in opinion between the pupils. Almost an equal number of pupils that are in favour of working in groups are also opposed to the idea. Unlike the pupils, all the teachers feel that group work is largely misunderstood and misused by the pupils. Perhaps reasons for these misconceptions can be found in the following theories. The following theories are all agreed on one thing and that is that learning or language acquisition takes place through communication. This means that group work even if misunderstood or misused, is a very essential tool in language learning.

In order to understand what the pupils as well as the teachers feel about classroom interaction the following theory might explain how the teachers and the pupils simultaneously interact and how the pupils learn English. The *Affective Filter Hypothesis* and *Input Hypothesis*
explain Krashen’s theories on input and interaction. The theory explains that “target language data which were understandable but with effort- and were slightly more advanced than the second language (SL) learner’s current level of comfortable understanding- would promote learning” (Krashen, 39). Krashen calls this kind of input the “i+1”. The “i” represents the learners current level of the target language development and the “+1” is the input which is challenging, but placed on a level just slightly more advanced than the proficiency level of the learner.

Filter

Input ----------   acquired Competence

Language Acquisition Device

Figure 1. Krashen’s Model on the Input theory (from Krashen and Terrell. 1983, 39).

If Krashen’s hypothesis is right, learning takes place in group discussions in spite of some pupils feeling that they are on different levels and that some pupils contribute less than others. The pupils that are on a lower level than their classmates will then perhaps learn from the ones on a higher level. However, not all researchers agree with Krashen. Other researchers such as Long (1999, 241), Allwright and Bailey (1991) challenge Krashen by arguing that it is not easy to see how mere exposure to input, even if comprehensible, actually promotes language development (122).

Long (1999), proposes that emphasis must be put on “the primacy of conversation (interaction) and its role in getting comprehensible input” (241) Although Long does not completely rule out Krashen’s theory, he believes that “language acquisition can perhaps best be seen, not as the outcome of an encounter with comprehensible input per se, but as the direct outcome of the work involved in the negotiation process itself” (Allwright et al.122).
Long illustrates his reasoning, with the figure adopted below. Long’s perspective is also known as the *Interactions Hypothesis (The Interactive Perspective).*

![Diagram of Long's Model of the relationship between type of conversational task and language acquisition](Long_1999Diagram.png)

Figure 2. Long’s Model of the relationship between type of conversational task and language acquisition (Long, 1999, 214).

In short, Long proposes that the language acquisition process takes place when learners put an effort into trying to make themselves understood (214). With this information in mind, one can safely say that when it comes to the pupils' learning, it is the effort that counts. If this is the case, then all group work and classroom interaction is positive to learning when an effort is put in.

From the pupils’ point of view, the most helpful way the teachers assist in acquiring grammar is through detailed and comprehensive explanations. The pupils also added that authentic materials provided by the teachers also help them to learn new words. As far as vocabulary learning is concerned, there are tens of thousands of word families to learn and that can hardly be accomplished solely through formal study, but has to be acquired and picked up through exposure to a language. Two main processes can be applied to explain vocabulary acquisition; *incidental learning* and *explicit learning* (Schmitt, 2000, 116).

*Incidental learning* takes place when learning is acquired “[t]hrough exposure when one’s attention is focused on the use of language rather than the learning itself” (Schmitt, 116). The pupils stated that the teachers encouraged them to read different texts, to watch TV and to listen to music as means for improving their vocabulary and these tools could be referred to as *incidental learning*. Another concept which is crucial when it comes to learning vocabulary is *explicit learning*. The teachers as well as the pupils emphasised upon the validity of looking up words, guessing the meaning of a word from its context. They also stress the importance of the teacher writing difficult words on the whiteboard. These tools could be defined as *explicit*
learning. In this case, the pupils learn the words by being more attentive to them and to their meaning, i.e. they are consciously working with words and consciously learning new words. Contrary to incidental learning, this process of language is called explicit learning, thus, it is a focused study of words (116).

The usage of the dictionary in and away from school was also perceived as being useful; however, here the vocabulary improvement process is entirely left to the pupils themselves. By encouraging the pupils to look up words the teachers use a kind of cognitive strategy. “A cognitive strategy is one which involves the learner engaging with the language and trying to make sense of it and in it” (Green, 13). Resourcing is mentioned as a cognitive strategy and entails using target language reference materials. Dictionaries are seen as such a device (13). Looking up words, drawing illustrations to keywords and creating one’s own sentences could all be linked to explicit learning.

The strategies stated above on cognition belong to this particular approach since “[e]xplcit learning focuses attention directly on the information to be learned, which gives the greatest chance for its acquisition” (Schmitt, 120). By helping and encouraging the pupils to use the tools discussed here the teachers are actively helping the pupils to improve their English vocabulary by exposing them to explicit learning. According to Schmitt, the field of psychology which is said to have a close connection to the area of language learning and processing, has provided a valid concept linked to explicit language learning and reads as follows: “the more one manipulates, thinks about, and uses mental information, the more likely it is that one will retain that information” (121).

When it comes to describing group work as a forum most of the pupils felt that it is a rewarding one since they get to share ideas, create dialogues, help others and get help back. This way the pupils seem to be a bit more responsible for their own learning since they are left to solve things by themselves. There is not a teacher present all the time to tell them what to do and to give them answers to things. This could be linked to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), because the focus is on the learner instead of the teacher creating, a so called learner-centred classroom (Antón, 303). Furthermore, the pupils felt that thanks to group work they get to create dialogues, discuss and express themselves. The group then apparently becomes a forum and a device for communication to take place. The pupils seemed to appreciate working in groups and they thought that they actually learned something by
sharing ideas and helping each other. The concept of CLT supports the pupils thoughts here since it “advocates having students to work in small groups in order to maximise their opportunities for communicative practise” (303).

Marta Antón writes that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) suggest that “there is a benefit in switching from the traditional teacher-centred class to a learner-centred classroom setting” (303). Furthermore, CLT calls for “a very active role for learners in the classroom and increased responsibility for their own learning” (303). This implies that the learner “should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an independent way” (304). To support this it is further suggested that learner-centred instruction “is a matter of educating learners so that they can gradually assume greater responsibility for their own learning” (Nunan, 12). The kind of learning mentioned above in this paragraph entails, repeating what the pupils have learned, looking up what they do not understand and practicing to use their newly acquired knowledge. This way of learning can clearly be seen as a method or style of learning supported by the Cognitive Perspective theory.

Furthermore, group work can be seen as a way of using CLT in the classrooms, however the pupils did not only express appreciation and happiness about working in groups. They reckoned that group work lead to a competitive environment, which was reflected by everyone wanting their opinion to be the right one and the one chosen to represent the ideas of the group. According to Dörnyei and Murphy (2003) there are four different phases that symbolise group work. The pupils’ feelings concerning the disadvantages of group work correspond well with the second phase of transition,”during the transition stage, differences and conflicts become common, stemming from disagreement and competition among members and between the group and the leader” (52). To conclude, what the pupils felt here could be seen as a kind of development or a process involved in group work.

The pupils also expressed a dislike with working in groups since they sometimes were forced to work with people they did not get along with or shared the same values and ideas with. These feelings and situations are likely to occur among school children, due to them going through turbulent periods in their lives and due to processes of maturation. The particular phase they are going through is prone to lead to or create what is called personality or relationships conflicts, which may be fuelled by disagreement over values, ideas and opinions. A dissatisfaction for another group member might be temporary, however if it escalates into
an expanding cycle, it can be immensely damaging to the group (Dörnyei and Murphy, 136-137). Hence, teachers are responsible for paying attention to the different phases and they should be aware of the fact that the stages are steps or hinders to overcome in order to achieve efficient and valuable group work: “Conflicts are an organic and necessary part of the transition phase and the most important advice to teachers about them is; do not panic. Relax. Have patience” (58).

When analysing the next part of the result data which deals with atmosphere, cohesion and things that do not work so well in the classroom, the Zone of Proximal Development is a good theory to start with. From the data results, the pupils point out that their teachers provide them with sufficient assistance in order for the pupils to carry out their school work. The pupils also state that their teachers have patience with them and make the learning environment comfortable. On the other hand, the pupils also contend that the teachers sometimes bring up discussions on language which they feel is too advanced for them to get involved in.

However, looking at the information given here by the pupils, the learning process matches the ZPD progression pattern. Vygotsky and Lantolf (Linguists and believers in the ZPD) state that the key terms in the ZPD are “collaboration, opportunities, and development” (Walsh, 2006, 33). These terms can be seen in the pupils’ perception of their learning and learning environments.

In addition to the latter paragraph and to the ZPD, group work was explained by the teachers as a forum favouring the pupils’ interaction and learning from each other. Those viewpoints agree with the interactionists’ theory implying that “language develops as a result of the complex interplay between the uniquely human characteristics of a child and the environment in which the child develops” (Lightbown and Spada, 22). To support the teachers’ thoughts concerning pupils’ learning from each other, one could refer to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. Vygotsky argued that a supportive interactive environment enables a child to reach a higher level of knowledge and performance than he or she would by his/her own efforts. “Vygotsky referred to what the child could do in interaction with another, but not alone, as the child’s zone of proximal development” (23). According to the sociocultural theory those pupils who are neglectful to their work and let others do it for them, will not benefit from it and they are not likely to reach the zone of proximal development.
This means that for group work to function as a forum for interaction, it must be controlled by the teacher who perhaps has to get involved and encourage the pupils or give each group member a specific task in order to offer all of them the same chances of reaching the zone of proximal development. Metaphorically, the teacher could be seen as a gardener who is supplying materials, such as resources and encouragement, for growth. Teachers might feel like they are loosing their role in a communicative classroom, but as a matter of fact, the contrary is true. In their book, Richards and Renandya (2002) uses a metaphor of a chessboard to argue that a teacher is the most powerful single piece on it. Thus, “[a]ccording to this metaphor, the teacher is the most powerful player in the classroom dynamics and determines the class structure” (46).

CONCLUSION

Finally, this study has explored what the pupils enjoy about English and their current learning environment, what they would like to improve in their learning environment and what they themselves can do to better their proficiency in the English language. Suggestions given by the pupils and the teachers indicate a mutual understanding and satisfaction from both the teachers and the pupils about their teaching and learning environment. It should be pointed out that the teachers show interest in the pupils’ reactions to classroom practices, experiences and the pupils’ perception of their learning environment. This can be deduced from statements in the last two questions taken up in the section teacher’s views. Consequently, interaction in a language class, in this case English, is fundamental to language acquisition and the promoting of meaningful learning. However, the prime responsibility of creating interactive learning opportunities lies with the teacher.

This study does not claim that the information that has been brought to light reflects actual behaviour which can be observed in these classrooms. This is partly because of the usage of questionnaires for the study, and partly because there was insufficient time to allow for actual observations to be done for this study. Hopefully, the findings of this study will provide direction for teachers and school policy makers in realising and understanding that ultimately, learners’ voices must be heard too, such as in learners’ preferences as stated by Lightbown and Spada (58-59), if positive change is to occur in the classroom or any learning environment. The pupils’ feelings towards their learning and social environments are reflected in the result part, where they mention that they appreciate the freedom of being able to sit where they please, eat fruit and listen to music.
REFERENCE LIST


Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden. *Curriculum for the compulsory school, the preschool class and the after school centre*. Lpo 94.


**Internet source:**
Till .............................................Målsman. Klass ....................

Skola .............................................................................

Vi är studenter på Malmö lärarhögskola och vi ska skriva en uppsats på kandidatexamens nivå vilket innebär forskningsmetodik. Det är av stort värde för studien, i fall ni ger ert barn tillåtelse att medverka i vår undersökning, om elevernas uppfattning om hur de lär sig engelska i sina nuvarande inlärningsmiljöer (klassrummet). Undersökningen kommer att omfatta ett frågeformulär i vilket ert barn kommer att svara på korta öppna frågor om vad hon/han tycker om sitt lärande. Med en sådan undersökning får eleverna tillfälle att uttrycka sina åsikter och känslor om sin inlärningsmiljö.

Skolans rektor har gett oss tillstånd att göra undersökningen, och informationen som eleverna kommer att lämna är sekretessbelagd. Detta betyder att elevernas namn eller personliga uppgifter inte får tas med i uppsatsen eller någon annanstans. Allt som kommer att nämnas är vad eleverna tycker angående sitt lärande på skolan.

Bessie Regenhardt
Lina Wall

Vår handledare är .Sara Hakansson, Malmö lärarhögskola.

Ort ................. Datum ................

Tfn: 040-84687 mobil: 0704-300056.
Tfn: 042-145349 mobil: 0739-906284

Vi tackar er för ert samarbete.

_____________________________________________________________________

Jag tillåter att mitt barn deltar i undersökningen. Kryssa här………

Jag tillåter inte att mitt barn deltar i undersökningen. Kryssa här………

Målmans underskrift .......................................................... 2006/………/……
Elevernas frågeformulär:
Vad eleverna tycker om sina inlärningsmetoder/inlärningsmiljö i engelska som andraspråk.

1. Bekriv hur du upplever engelska som ämne?

2. Vilka olika sätt ("knepp", studieteknik) använder du för att lära dig engelska?

3. Vilka sätt ("knepp", metoder) använder din lärare när han/hon undervisar i engelska?

4. Vilka är fördelarna med att jobba i grupp tycker du?

5. Vilka är nackdelarna med att jobba i grupp tycker du?

6. Hur undervisar din lärare i grammatik?

7. Hur undervisar din lärare i läsförståelse, hur träna ni på det?
Elevernas frågeformulär:
Vad eleverna tycker om sina inlärningsmetoder/inlärningsmiljö i engelska som andra språk.

8. På vilka sätt hjälper din lärare dig för att förbättra ordförrådet i engelska?

9. Hur är stämningen och sammanhållningen bland eleverna i klassen och läraren på engelskskeletionerna tycker du?

10. Finns det något som inte fungerar så bra i klasmitten när du lär dig engelska och i så fall vad?

11. Vad uppskattar du mest med din inlärningsmiljö/klassrumsmiljö?

12. Vad skulle du vilja förbättra i din inlärningsmiljö gällande sätt du lär dig engelska på, stämning i klassen, arbete i helklass/halvklass/grupp/par, eller kanske något annat?

13. Hur kan du själv påverka att du förbättrar din engelska?

Tack för ditt deltagande

Bostina Regenerstorff
Lisen Wall
Kandidatexamen
11/2006
Lärarnas frågeomulär:

Vad lärarna tycker om sina undervisningsmetoder/klassrummiljö i engelska som andraspråk.

1. Vad tror du att dina elever tycker om engelsklektioner, baserat på deras engagemang i ämnet?
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2. Vilka inlärningsmetoder använder du dig av när du undervisar dina elever i engelska?
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3. Tror du att det finns det några inlärningsmetoder eleverna föredrar mer än andra?
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4. Vilka är fördelarna för eleverna att jobba i grupp tycker du?
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5. Vilka är nackdelarna för eleverna att jobba i grupp tycker du?
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6. Vilka metoder använder du i grammatikundervisningen?
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7. Vilka metoder använder du vid läsförståelseinlärning?
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8. Vilka metoder använder du för att förbättra dina elevers ordförråd i engelska?

9. Hur är stämningen och klassrumsdynamiken i dina undervisningsmiljöer?

10. Vad tor du att eleverna kan göra för att påverka sin språkutveckling i engelska?

11. Vilka olika ”knepp” och klassrumskonstellationer har du provat för att gynna inlärningen av engelska som andraspråk?

Tack för ditt deltagande