Developing Teaching for Students with Special Needs

Britta K LarssonLindberg, Jonkoping University

A study on how to develop the ability to write a message in English as a second/foreign language, in 13-16 year old Swedish students with dyslexia.

Swedish teachers often find teaching English to students with dyslexia difficult. Within the English subject, writing is considered being the most difficult. To develop ways of teaching these students, teachers need an enhanced understanding of what might be difficult, as well as what aspects that are important to learn in order to develop the ability to write in English. This includes aspects of the writing ability, and also the students' understanding of the task and the learning situation.

A Learning Study was performed by English teachers on a school for children with dyslexia. The study is based on the assumptions that the preconceptions of a learning situation can either facilitate or impede learning, and will most likely affect the actions and the results of the students’ efforts. Hence the students experiencing of writing in English was first explored in interviews, in order to find problems and misconceptions that may impede learning as well as aspects that develop the ability. Results of interviews show that the students see writing as assessment rather than a communicative activity. The teacher is the perceived receiver and the students believe that accuracy in spelling is the teacher’s main focus, which causes the students to focus the spelling rather than communicative aspects of writing.

Based on the results of the interviews, a hypothesis was that the students’ understanding of writing as assessment springs from the writing instruction they have met, where spelling has been emphasized. Hence spelling is in focus rather than content and the ability that the students have most problems with is what they spend time and effort on. In a Learning Study the research group, explored whether a focus on content above form could change the students' understanding of the writing task and the learning situation, and if this would change their writing. The lessons were carried out with groups of 5-8 students, all diagnosed with dyslexia. The lessons, including pair work, were recorded, to enable a close analysis of the students' understanding of the tasks and the situation, which then lead to further development of the lesson designs. The preliminary results of the learning study implicate that the students' focus can be changed from spelling towards aspects of the of the content, by comparing texts through different patterns of variation.

In the Learning Study, aspects of writing were exemplified or explicit made, to create knowledge about impediments teachers need to be aware of, as well as what aspects teachers need to make discernable to the students to enhance the writing ability. The study aims at producing knowledge about writing in relation to students with special needs, in order to improve teachers’ possibilities to cater for individual differences.