Textbooks and Alternative material

- positive and negative aspects
Abstract
This study is about what three teachers and three students in an upper secondary school in southern Sweden consider to be the positive and negative aspects of teaching/learning English with textbooks and alternative material respectively. The focus in the study is to compare the teachers’ perspectives and the students’ perspectives, and the method used is in-depth interviews.

The results showed that the teachers and the students shared many similar opinions about textbooks and alternative material as well as providing some different ones. All of the teachers emphasized the fact that teaching with textbooks saves them a lot of time. One of the teachers had her own opinion about textbooks. She claimed that they idealize western cultures and perspectives which is negative because students get a false picture of the world. Moreover, the majority of the teachers found it good to work with alternative material because they can use current topics which do not exist in textbooks. However, they believed that it takes too much time to work exclusively with alternative material because the workload becomes too big for them.

The majority of the students enjoyed working with textbooks due to the fact that they know exactly what to do from time to time and can work in advance when they like to. However, all of the students found it boring that textbooks never contain current topics. All the students liked to work with alternative material because of interesting topics and the possibility of choosing topics themselves. Considering the negative aspects of alternative material one student said that a lot of the material on the Internet is unreliable. Moreover, another student believed that it takes too much time to work with alternative material because he has to ask more questions about the various alternative projects.

There were some connections between my results and previous studies on the topic. Moreover, both the teachers and the students interviewed in this study had positive and negative opinions about textbooks and alternative material which is interesting.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. BACKGROUND 1
   2.1 The birth of textbooks 1
   2.2 Two different types of textbooks in the language classroom 2
   2.2.1 Traditional textbooks 2
   2.2.2 Communicative textbooks 3
   2.3 The advantages of textbooks 3
   2.4 The disadvantages of textbooks 4
   2.5 Alternative material 5

3. METHOD AND MATERIAL 6
   3.1 Material 6
   3.2 Procedure 7
   3.3 Problems and limitations 7

4. RESULTS 8
   4.1 Interview with Olle (Teacher 1) 8
   4.2 Interview with Anna (Teacher 2) 10
   4.3 Interview with Bengt (Teacher 3) 13
   4.4 Interview with Emil (Student 1) 14
   4.5 Interview with Fredrik (Student 2) 16
   4.6 Interview with Mattias (Student 3) 17

5. CONCLUSION 19
   5.1 Textbooks 19
   5.2 Alternative material 19
   5.3 Concluding remarks 21

6. LIST OF REFERENCES 22

INTERVIEW GUIDE APPENDIX 23
1. Introduction
Teaching English is a complex task that involves many choices made by the teacher. One of these is whether to teach with course books or without them. Every method has its advantages and disadvantages and it is interesting to sort them out in order to have them in mind when teaching English. The aim of this study is to investigate the positive and negative aspects of teaching English with textbooks or without them. My research questions are:

(1) What do teachers consider to be the positive and negative aspects of using textbooks and alternative material?
(2) What do students consider to be the positive and negative aspects of using textbooks and alternative material?

I have mostly had teachers who have used textbooks when they taught English and, to me, it felt good because you had a nice structure to follow, but sometimes it could be a little boring. However, one of my teachers did not use textbooks at all and this was something new to me. I wondered which method was best because I could notice that both methods had its strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, during my teacher training I have come to realize that Swedish teachers are free to choose whatever method they like and that it can very often be difficult to choose.

Teachers need more guidance and information about the aspects of teaching with textbooks or without them in order to make the right choices and to be able to show students who are not satisfied with either method that there are positive aspects in this particular method which will help them to learn English. In the syllabus for English at the upper secondary level in Sweden it is stated that students are to “deepen their ability to read, understand and reflect critically over non-fiction and specialist texts within their area of interest and competence or studies” (the syllabus of English at the upper secondary level, my translation). If a teacher, for instance, only teaches with textbooks and this textbook lacks areas of interest for some students, this teacher does not provide the opportunity for his or her students to reach the goals of the syllabus.

2. Background
2.1 The birth of textbooks
In the 1800s, education changed totally due to the fact that science and the art of printing books broke through. There were great social revolutions and agricultural society was phased out as industrialism was beginning to take over. At this point there was much focus on control
and discipline and education was formed by these two factors (Johnsen et al 1998: 185). Moreover, Johnsen notes that many different countries developed new systems so that masses of people could get education. Classrooms became the central point where teachers taught behind their desks. As a consequence, teaching and learning were to be based on textbooks. Furthermore, the process of using textbooks in schools resulted in the making of curricula and syllabi. In this way, teachers could mark and control students more easily because they had a better overview of knowledge content. There was a clear parallel between knowledge and learning facts and due to the fact that knowledge was put down to writing, it was possible to work out structures and hierarchies of knowledge (ibid: 185).

2.2 Two different types of textbooks in the language classroom

The number of textbooks used for language learning is very large and so is the variation and, therefore, it can be hard to generalize them. People provide different categorisations of textbooks (Grant 1990: 12), but Grant suggests that they can be put into two wide categories; traditional textbooks and communicative textbooks. However, there may also be textbooks sometimes that do not fit into either of these categories (ibid: 12).

2.2.1 Traditional textbooks

Publishing houses still publish “traditional” textbooks today. However, the focus is not on publishing dates in this categorisation, but rather on describing what characteristics a textbook have (Grant 1990: 13). Grant claims that “the traditional textbook tries to get students to learn the language as a system. Once they have learned the system, it is hoped that they are then equipped to use the language for their own purposes in any way they think” (ibid: 13). Grant (1990: 13) points out some of the characteristics of traditional textbooks:

- They focus more on grammar than on communication.
- They emphasise exercises where students read and write instead of exercises where they listen and speak.
- They use L1 (the language which language learners already speak) very much.
- Accuracy is an important aspect.
- Some teachers like them because they think that they are easy to use.

Many teachers use traditional textbooks all over the world. They are easy to use, which is good, and students often work diligently with them. However, the disadvantage of them might be that when students have completed the textbooks after years of hard work they cannot
communicate in the language after they have finished their studies, despite the fact that they
might be proficient in its grammar (Grant 1990: 13).

### 2.2.2 Communicative textbooks

Grant (1990: 13) claims that communicative textbooks create possibilities for students to
communicate in the language because they consist of many communicative activities. As a
result, students will be able to use the language when they have finished school (Grant 1990:
13). Here are some of the characteristics of communicative textbooks (ibid);

- They focus on communicative aspects.
- They try to cover topics that students are interested in.
- They focus more on language skills than on grammar and therefore there are many
  communicative activities.
- They emphasise students working together, in groups or in pairs.
- Fluency is an important aspect as well as accuracy.

If students work with exercises in the classroom that help them use the language outside of
school, those exercises are communicative activities. Moreover, when students do things in
the classroom it is more likely that they will be able to do them in real life (ibid: 14).

### 2.3 The advantages of textbooks

There are advantages of using textbooks in the classroom and both teachers and students can
benefit from these. According to Harmer (2001:304) “many good textbooks are attractively
presented and they are prepared with a good structure that offer a coherent syllabus,
satisfactory language control and motivating texts and tapes” (Harmer 2001:304). Furthermore,
many students like textbooks because they feel that they have achieved something when they
finish chapter after chapter, and then finally the whole book, because progress encourages them in a positive way (ibid: 304). This has also been observed by T. Woodward (2001: 46) and McKenzie (1997[www]).

Richards (2001: 1[www]) emphasizes that using textbooks saves the teacher a great deal
of time. Teachers can use this time for teaching instead of producing material themselves
(ibid). Similarly, A. Woodward (1987:511) claims that teachers feel that it would be very
difficult, impossible sometimes, to teach and give instructions from one day to the other
without the help of textbooks and teachers’ guides. Lastly, Christenbury (1994) claims:
To expect today’s teachers, already overburdened and overwhelmed, to create original curricula not driven by textbooks requires an institutional investment of time and money which few school systems will commit. It is just simpler to put together a textbook selection committee and let them, essentially, choose a pre-packaged curriculum (Christenbury 1994:77).

There are also other advantages of textbook use. Firstly, if a teacher uses the same textbook in all of his or her classes the students will work with the same material and content. As a consequence, teachers can test their students in a similar way (Richards 2001:1[www]). Secondly, teachers who are not so experienced and need some kind of teacher training can benefit from textbooks due to the fact that they can function as initial training for them to develop their teaching (ibid). Thirdly, Richards points out that all teachers do not have English as their first language and textbooks can help them to use the language properly in class (Richards 2001:2[www]). Finally, McKenzie (1997[www]) further points out that schools, teachers and students need textbooks because they are full of knowledge which editors have compacted and controlled. Editors try to make sure that all material is at a proper quality level (ibid).

2.4 The disadvantages of textbooks

There are also disadvantages of using textbooks and Harmer (1998:116-117) points out that some teachers do not approve of textbooks at all. These teachers claim that both they and their students are bored by using textbooks due to the fact that they many times contain material that is not interesting enough. Furthermore, they claim that there is little variation in textbooks, which makes teaching and learning stifling (ibid). Teachers who do not approve of textbooks like to use their own imagination, alternative material such as pieces from books and magazines and ideas that students give them etc (ibid). The risk of using textbooks is that teachers and students can become too attached to the textbook they are using and ignore all other sources of material. As a consequence, the textbook will control the teaching and learning in the classroom (ibid: 117).

Richards (2001:2 [www]) claims that teachers who base their teaching on textbooks can become deskilled. If they cannot decide what instructions to give themselves and let textbooks do this for them, their function as teachers has become reduced because then they only present what others have written (Richards 2001:2 [www]).
Another disadvantage of using textbooks is that their content is not always 100 per cent genuine and objective. There is a lack of representation of real issues due to the fact that editors exclude topics that are controversial so that the textbooks will be more widely accepted. As a consequence, Richards claims, “an idealized white middle-class view of the world is portrayed as the norm” (ibid: 2[www]). In comparison, Johnsen notes some examples of discrimination in textbooks, for example what Helga Stene observed in textbooks already in the 1950s. She proved that women were depicted in a way which was discriminating. For example, in one arithmetic textbook they were clearly underrepresented. Out of all exercises in the book, women only had an active part in two per cent of them (Johnsen 1993:109). Similarly, in 1977, another study that Hjørdis Heide published proved how women were depicted as inferior to men in a number of social science textbooks (ibid: 109). Another example of bias in textbooks is an article in Svenska Dagbladet that remarks that some textbooks in social studies contain biases against immigrants. This is insulting for students and they may feel uncomfortable reading this (Svenska Dagbladet [www]).

Lastly, Grant (1990:38) emphasizes that many textbooks used for language learning are deficient due to the fact that they do not contain any genuine communicative activities at all. Other textbooks contain some communicative exercises, but not enough (Grant 1990: 38).

2.5 Alternative material

Instead of using course books teachers can produce their own material to use when teaching English. For example, they can make their own pictures and cards, or use videos and audiotapes which they have recorded or produced themselves. Moreover, they can use grammar worksheets, texts taken from the Internet, or photocopied texts from other sources, and make exercises related to the texts on overhead transparencies (Harmer 2001: 151). Most of what has been said about textbooks previously can be used to discuss advantages and disadvantages of alternative material as well. The negative aspects of textbooks correspond to positive aspects of alternative material and vice versa. For example, teachers who use alternative material will have to find and create it themselves, which takes a great deal of time in comparison to using text books (ibid).

According to Brown (2000: 160) most people consider motivation to be the most important thing when succeeding with difficult tasks. In second language learning we often see motivation as the factor that decides whether one succeeds or fails. This general opinion is supported by experiments and many studies (Brown 2000: 160). As observed by Yule (1996:
language learners’ motivation can be affected positively or negatively depending on whether the material used is interesting or boring, and as pointed out above (2.4), it is often claimed that textbooks are boring and offer little variation. Alternative material may provide more stimulation and thus enhance students’ motivation.

3. Method and material
In this study three teachers and three students were interviewed. They were randomly picked at an upper secondary school in southern Sweden. The focus was not on finding informants of a great variety, such as different ages, sexes, and years of teaching or informants teaching or studying at different schools. Instead, the intention was to interview three teachers and three students in order to see if, or to what extent, the perspectives of them agreed or disagreed. Moreover, the focus was also put on interviewing experienced teachers that have worked with a lot of different textbooks and alternative material over the years. The teachers who were interviewed have all worked as English teachers for over 20 years and they were therefore chosen due to the fact that experience might lead to new insights. Furthermore, all three teachers in the study both teach with textbooks and with alternative material and the students also work with both textbooks and alternative material. This is important due to the fact that they can comment on both methods. They were interviewed one by one and were immediately informed that everything they said was strictly anonymous. All the informants have been given other names in order to keep them anonymous.

3.1 Material
Teacher number one, Olle, is 59 years old and has taught English for 34 years. At the moment he is teaching English A, B and C at the Social Science Programme. Teacher number 2, Anna, is 58 years old and has worked as an English teacher for 30 years. She now teaches English A and B at the Media Programme. Teacher number 3, Bengt, is 55 years old and has worked as an English teacher for 22 years. He now teaches English A and B at the Social Science Economics Programme. Student number one, Emil, is 17 years old and studies English B at the Media programme. Student number 2, Fredrik, is 17 years old and studies English B at the Social Science Programme. Student number 3, Mattias, is 17 years old and studies English B at the Natural Science Programme.

At the upper secondary school there are around 700 students and 16 different programs. It is a rather big school which also comprises university courses, adult education and a special
school for mentally retarded people. There are mainly theoretical programmes but also several vocational programmes. Lastly the school is located in a small municipality and there are mainly students from the region’s neighborhoods, but also from other municipalities.

3.2 Procedure
The interviews were held in a room at the school and based on an interview guide with a few extensive questions (see appendix). The informants were interviewed one by one and every interview took between 30 and 45 minutes. Everything was recorded with a mini-disc recorder. This technical apparatus was necessary due to the fact that it was important to talk to the informants all along the interview and ask them follow-up questions. Their answers were long and detailed so there was no chance of remembering all of it or writing it down. All of the interviews were carried out in Swedish due to the fact that in this way it should be easier to formulate oneself and not waste concentration on trying to find words etc. Moreover, half of the informants were students and asking them to talk in English and answer the questions as well as they could was too much to ask for. I have made the translations of quotes presented in the Results section.

The reason for using interviews as a method is that it is easier to get as much information as possible. The answers in an interview are more extensive than in a questionnaire and if an informant does not understand a question they can immediately ask for an explanation. Furthermore, depending on the informants’ answers, it is possible to ask follow-up questions to find out more about what is said or to get a clearer picture.

3.3 Problems and limitations
Some of the informants provided very similar answers to some questions. Furthermore, the teachers often based their answers on how they thought the students felt about matters and it was constantly necessary to ask them to answer what they believed themselves. Sometimes the questions led to interesting discussions outside of the subject and it was necessary to disrupt the informants due to the fact that the time and energy was to be spent on the subject in focus.

Some students had problems to answer follow-up questions and broaden their perspective. For example, when they were asked to give examples they could not always answer.
Lastly, this is a small study whose results cannot be generalized. However, it can show some interesting perspectives that may be of importance to other teachers, students and other people.

4. Results
The interviews will be presented one at a time, teachers before students, starting with different aspects of textbooks and moving on to alternative material.

4.1 Interview with Olle (Teacher 1)
4.1.1 What are the positive aspects of teaching with textbooks?
Olle points out that one advantage of using textbooks is that someone else has already been thinking about what is important and should be included in the courses that he teaches. When there is a textbook in front of him on the desk he does not feel so stressed due to the fact that it is not necessary to think about what to teach before every lesson. For instance, he does not have to find texts himself and make grammar exercises for his students. Moreover, there is no need for finding words or speaking exercises because the textbooks provide all that for him. Olle claims that the textbooks he uses have a very varying range, both the contents and the linguistic parts. Consequently, the textbook saves Olle a great deal of time and energy and they give him confidence in his teaching due to the fact that he feels that he teaches with qualitative textbooks whose contents are good.

Olle further points out that it is easier to work with his students when they are using the textbooks due to the fact that they have wordlists. They do not have to go and get dictionaries and share them with each other. This saves both Olle and his students a lot of time because a small factor like getting a dictionary can disturb some students’ concentration.

4.1.2 What are the negative aspects of teaching with textbooks?
Regarding negative aspects of textbook use Olle claims that:

I am constantly aware of the syllabus and curriculum when I teach and to be really honest I do not think that everything is in the textbooks. Whenever I use the textbook I constantly ask myself; what does the syllabus say about the exercises or texts I am working with? Are they enough?
Sometimes the answer is no and, as a consequence, Olle has to find some of the parts which the textbooks lack in alternative material. For example, not many textbooks include films and if they do, in some rare cases, they are out-of-date.

Another disadvantage of using textbooks is that many students depend so much on them that they think that the course is the textbook. This is not the case and when Olle goes outside the textbook in his teaching some students immediately become confused and want to go back to the book. Olle asserts that he sometimes also becomes locked in the textbook and bases his tests almost entirely on what he and his students have been working with in the textbook. It was worse before, he says; “I was very afraid of leaving the textbook and work with alternative material and I believe I missed a lot by doing so”.

Moreover, Olle claims that his students are bored if they only work with the textbook which results in them not learning very much. If a chapter is uninteresting for some of his students he notices that they do not pay that much attention to it. As a consequence, those students do not learn anything.

Olle does not believe that the speaking exercises in the textbooks that he uses are good enough. He explains that it is not real communication where one question is followed by a written down answer that lacks a word, for instance. There might be speaking exercises that are better, for instance, a square where a provoking statement is written down and it is the students’ assignment to argue against this statement. However, Olle believes that it is not the ultimate speaking exercise. A real speaking exercise is when he and his students discuss real life issues, for instance, what they have been doing to make their lives better or what they think about recent major events. In such exercises, the students tell each other about various matters which they did not know before.

4.1.3 What are the positive aspects of teaching with alternative material?
Olle says that he sometimes hands out the aims of the syllabus to his students and they can, with his help, find material to work with in order to reach the aims. This trains the students’ ability to find material that is good and relevant for the course. When students have a great variety of alternative teaching material in front of them they can reflect and ask themselves if it is good and useful material. With a textbook they cannot train this ability to the same extent because they only focus on working with the book, Olle claims.

Similarly, individualisation is also an important aspect when it comes to teaching without the textbook. Olle states that when his students find material which they are supposed to work with alone and become engrossed in (a presentation for example) he can see their
individuality strengthen due to the fact that they found the subject and all the material
themselves. This could be important for further studies where they have to decide what to
work with.

Furthermore, matters which are current to this day we cannot find in textbooks and it is
easy to work with extracts from newspapers, recordings from television and other media. It is
a great freedom to choose from secondary sources which contain current topics and events
that interest the students. Olle believes that if he can capture the students’ interest and needs,
it is much easier to teach and work with the students. For instance, the students are much
more motivated and find it fun to work with new, current and interesting material outside of
the textbook. Moreover it is more stimulating both for Olle and his students to work with
alternative material due to the fact that it always contains something new and so do the ways
of working.

4.1.4 What are the negative aspects of teaching with alternative material?
It becomes harder for Olle to work without textbooks than using textbooks because he
believes that he does not have the same complete control that he has when he teaches with
textbooks. For instance, if he is working with the textbook, pages 78, 79 and 80, and this is
the homework for tomorrow, then he believes that he has control over what his students are
working with at the moment and how much they have accomplished etc. It feels like a big
disadvantage for Olle not to have this control when he is teaching without textbooks.

4.2 Interview with Anna (Teacher 2)

4.2.1 What are the positive aspects of teaching with textbooks?
Anna says that it makes teaching and learning much easier when they have a textbook to
follow. The students have all material collected in one book in front of them. Furthermore, it
makes it easier for the students to work with it at home etc. Anna explains that using a
textbook saves her a great deal of time because she does not have to make any material herself
and her students save some energy because they do not have to keep track of various handouts
or other alternative material which they very often lose. Furthermore, the students have a
concrete base which gives them a sense of security. Moreover Anna points out;

There are some students who suffer from reading and writing difficulties and
even hearing problems. For these students the textbook is even more
important to have as a concrete base, and they almost depend on the fact that they can finish chapter after chapter. I really need to show the weak students carefully where to start and where to stop in the textbook, otherwise they become really insecure.

Another positive aspect is that when Anna’s students start the second year at the upper secondary school they have already been working with last year’s textbook and know how it is structured and what is expected from them. As a consequence, her students work more effectively and feel much more secure. She saves a lot of instructional time in this way because most of her students know what to do and many times even take the initiative.

Moreover, Anna is very satisfied with the texts in the textbooks she has been using for a while due to the fact that they are rather long, coherent and interesting. The texts are very varied; literary texts, texts about various subjects, poems and texts with relations to pictures. This is good because the students are stimulated and enjoy working with these books, she claims. Due to the fact that many students find the texts interesting they read them in advance before class, which makes them well prepared. However, Anna explains that she has chosen these textbooks herself and that most of the textbooks she has been working with in her three decades as a teacher are not so good when it comes to reading texts (see further below).

4.2.2 What are the negative aspects of teaching with textbooks?

Anna believes that the textbooks she has been using contain too few writing exercises. She feels that both she and her students need more short exercises in the textbook instead of one very long writing exercise at the end of every chapter. As a consequence, Anna does not have time to correct the long writing exercises from time to time.

Generally, Anna thinks that texts in most textbooks are very boring and too arranged. Furthermore, she says;

I believe that the texts are often too short and the quality is too low and it seems like the editor of the textbooks often underestimates students’ reading abilities. Many of my students lose interest in the texts because they are too easy.

Anna further points out that textbooks are expensive for the school and she constantly has to tell her students not to write in them and to be careful with them. The textbooks must
last for five years and the two last age groups often get worn out textbooks that are written in and sometimes destroyed.

Lastly, Anna does not like how many textbooks portray men and women. Equality is not always natural and this influences her students negatively. Moreover, she claims that the textbooks she uses constantly treat western perspectives, values and cultures as the right ways to live, whereas other cultures are pictured as wild and inferior. One textbook that she uses portrays native peoples as savages and almost as animals. Those are false portrays because these peoples are not living their lives in the way textbooks describe them. This is an important aspect where textbooks fail heavily.

4.2.3 *What are the positive aspects of teaching with alternative material?*

Anna emphasizes the fact that alternative material offers many different possibilities to bring up issues which are current in society and also current in the class. This is important because if the students are to have a fair chance to pass the national tests they must learn about current world issues. Moreover, her students are in the Media programme and it is a great advantage for them to choose material themselves to work with that deals with the media. There is not so much of that subject in the English textbooks Anna is using. It is stimulating for her to have the freedom to choose whatever material she likes and it feels very effective and good to choose books that deal with the media because the students cooperate more. This is due to the fact that most of her students are interested in the media.

4.2.4 *What are the negative aspects of teaching with alternative material?*

“If I use alternative material the workload becomes too big for me as a teacher due to the fact that I have to organise everything myself”, Anna claims. Moreover, she explains how hard it is for her to check all material and to see if the exercises she makes are at the right level for all students etc. Anna explains that she does not have the time like editors have to create good material.

Anna points out that it is sometimes hard to get her students to cooperate with her when she teaches with alternative material. For example, when she hands out excerpts from Newsweek the students immediately complain and some even resist working. Due to the fact that it is new material much of the students’ concentration is spent on complaining or asking questions about how they are supposed to work with the text, instead of only following the instructions that she gives.
Cost is also a disadvantage when it comes to teaching without textbooks because Anna has to copy very much and a great deal of paper is spent. She does not have the time or energy to make nice material. The pages are black and white and they are fastened together with paper clips.

4.3 Interview with Bengt (Teacher 3)

4.3.1 What are the positive aspects of teaching with textbooks?

Bengt finds it positive to work with textbooks due to the fact that they cover so many aspects of language learning:

I believe it is a positive aspect both for me and my students that textbooks contain different activities such as writing, speaking, listening and writing exercises. It is effective to work this way because my students train several aspects of the English language.

Moreover, Bengt feels comfortable using textbooks as the base for his teaching because he saves a lot of time. He says that textbooks are loaded with much good and qualitative material that he would not have time to create himself. As a consequence, he both saves a lot of time and teaches with good material where the students can learn much.

Another positive aspect is that textbooks contain good speaking exercises that follow every text. There are several proposals of what could be discussed in connection to the topic of the text.

4.3.2 What are the negative aspects of teaching with textbooks?

Bengt believes that the syllabus requires more from the students than what textbooks can achieve. For example, the syllabus for English at the A course says that the students should be able to carry out discussions where they give their opinions and meet others and the textbooks he uses do not contain any exercises where the students can do this.

Bengt states that at the B course his students have developed their reading abilities and want to be challenged by the texts in the textbook. However, the texts are at the same level as in the books for the A level and that is too poor for his students at the B level.
4.3.3 What are the positive aspects of teaching with alternative material?
Bengt explains that it can be very interesting to bring up topics which textbooks lack, such as what the students want to do in the future and how their lives have been in the past etc. The discussions are often very interesting and he gets a lot of feedback from his students. He points out the fact that deep discussions like this makes it funnier and perhaps easier for his students to communicate in the English language due to the fact that they want to speak about their issues and get feedback. As a consequence, they try harder and focus more on speaking English.

4.3.4 What are the negative aspects of teaching with alternative material?
Bengt emphasizes the fact that when he collects various materials and gives out handouts his students find this problematic. Many times they lose their handouts, bring the wrong handouts to class or leave them at home. A lot of time is spent telling the students how to keep their material and not lose it or to prevent future situations where the students have forgotten to bring material to class. This may seem as something obvious but many of his students do not get a file and then they keep losing their handouts etc.

Moreover, Bengt feels that it takes a lot of time to create material himself because he has to find texts from various sources and then consider whether they are good, both if they relate to the syllabus and if his students will like the texts. His students also find boring texts in the textbook, but if they complain about the material that Bengt has chosen he feels bad. Furthermore, when he finds a text that he believes is good he has to make wordlists, grammar exercises and other types of exercises and that takes a lot of time.

Lastly, Bengt claims that the students that are weak do not accomplish as much as they do working with textbooks. They often feel more insecure than the stronger students and constantly ask for guidance. He says that working without textbooks involves more responsibility from his students and many times they cannot take that extra responsibility.

4.4 Interview with Emil (Student 1)
4.4.1 What are the positive aspects of working with textbooks?
Emil enjoys reading most of the texts in the textbooks because they are interesting. He likes the variation in the books because every new chapter contains a new topic. Furthermore he believes that the texts are very instructive and gives him knowledge about various topics. Moreover, the reading texts in the textbooks are at the proper difficulty level for him.
Another positive aspect of the textbooks that Emil is using is that it includes a compact disc. He says; “when I am tired at home I can put on the CD and just relax while listening to it”. Afterwards, he knows what the whole chapter is about and he appreciates the option of being able to listen to the text instead of reading it.

Emil explains that it is comfortable to have a wordlist at the back of the book because when he does not understand a word it takes him a few seconds to find out what the word means. Moreover, due to the fact that he has all the words for one text in one place he sometimes learns them all in advance and later reads the texts without problems understanding it.

4.4.2 What are the negative aspects of working with textbooks?

The only negative aspect Emil believes there is when working with textbooks is that even though the texts are interesting they are a bit too old-fashioned. He lacks topics of recent events which he would like to learn more about in order for him to become more well-read.

4.4.3 What are the positive aspects of working with alternative material?

Emil claims that it is fun to be able to choose what he wants to work with. When he is given the opportunity to do this he chooses something that he is very interested in and which the textbook does not contain. As a consequence, he is more motivated and eager to find knowledge and learn as much as he can of that particular subject. Moreover, he has friends with the same areas of interest and he can ask them for help.

4.4.4 What are the negative aspects of working with alternative material?

Emil points out that if he finds an article by himself he finds it lengthy to find a dictionary and look up the words he does not understand. He has to turn the pages many times and often share the dictionary with another student sitting next to him. Furthermore, Emil says that he has no possibility of learning the words in advance because there is not a wordlist.

Emil also finds the difficulty level to be a little high. He often gets newspaper articles from the *Times* or *Newsweek* from his teacher and he has problems of understanding the texts, due to the jargon, other difficult words and often foreign topics.

When Emil’s teacher gives him and the other students a task to find a topic on their own and write about that, it sometimes happens that what they find on the Internet is not authentic, correct material. He does not have that problem with the textbook due to the fact that he can rely on the content there. When using the Internet he constantly has to check with his teacher.
and other people to see if the facts he finds are true and reliable. He sometimes finds topics at
home after school, when he has been given homework to do so, and has no chance of asking
his teacher whether the material is reliable. Moreover, he does not feel so comfortable reading
material on the Internet because he often finds grammatical errors and then does not know
which texts are correct or not.

Lastly, Emil claims that when his teacher introduces new texts or he has to find some
texts by himself to work with there are never any compact discs included which he can listen
to. That is negative due to the fact that if he is tired and does not feel like reading the text he
does not have the opportunity to listen to it instead.

4.5 Interview with Fredrik (Student 2)

4.5.1 What are the positive aspects of working with textbooks?

Fredrik finds it secure to work with the textbooks because he almost knows exactly what to
do. He has the possibility to work with other chapters further ahead if he plans to be busy later
on or if he does not know what to do. Moreover, he feels as if he has control because he has
all the material in one book.

4.5.2 What are the negative aspects of working with textbooks?

Fredrik says that working with the textbooks is boring because he cannot use his own
imagination that much. Moreover, it is not so creative for him to work with the textbooks
because he does not like most of the contents in the textbooks. He states:

> When my classmates and I read a text in the textbook in class it is often
> about a boring topic, for instance a history about an old cowboy or
> something like that, afterwards we follow instructions and discuss various
> matters about the text. Moreover, there are no current subjects in the
> textbooks.

Many texts are not authentic and they are made up only for teaching purposes,
which does not make them motivating.

Moreover, Fredrik does not find it stimulating to work with the listening exercises in the
textbooks because they are too boring and instructional. His class has to listen to a text and
answer questions which are in the textbook. For example, they can be questions about what a
particular character was doing at one moment and what happened to him/her after that. To Fredrik, it feels like he is only listening to a made-up piece of text, which is not so rewarding.

4.5.3 What are the positive aspects of working with alternative material?
Fredrik points out that sometimes he and his class give his teacher some example topics of some interesting events which have taken place. His teacher then chooses a topic which they discuss in class and sometimes some exercises follow. The discussion in class can be very interesting and intellectual, and the main reason for this, Fredrik claims, is that the majority is interested in the topic and has something to say about it.

Furthermore, Fredrik’s teacher sometimes gives his class an interesting Hollywood movie which they watch and later on write a paper about. He finds it relaxing and fun to watch a movie because it gives him a little break from the stressful education. At the same time it is instructive for him because he listens to the English language and writes a paper about his reflections of the movie in English. The movies are instructive themselves because they are always movies about authentic events, racism or other important topics.

Lastly, at Fredrik’s programme there are grammar exercises on the computers which are fun and easy to use. He learns a lot from using them and finds it pleasant to work alone at the computer.

4.5.4 What are the negative aspects of working with alternative material?
The only negative aspect Fredrik says there is working without the textbook is that it takes more time than working with the textbook. More responsibility is put on him and it takes more effort for him to carry out various projects. He has to ask more questions about the project they are working with and feels uncertain about what grade he will get for what he accomplishes.

4.6 Interview with Mattias (Student 3)
4.6.1 What are the positive aspects of working with textbooks?
Mattias claims that it is nice to be able to start a new task if he has finished one before all the other students. Moreover, if at the moment he has very little homework and a lot of time to spare, he can start working with other chapters in the textbook in advance. As a result, he has more time when he gets more homework.
4.6.2 What are the negative aspects of working with textbooks?
Mattias says that the texts in the textbook are too easy and that he almost does not learn any new words when reading them. He does not find it stimulating to read the texts in the textbook. He has a lot of creativity and ideas and cannot get an outlet for those working with the textbooks.

Another negative aspect is that he feels very limited and locked up working with the textbook. Mattias emphasizes the fact that the structure is the same in every chapter and it feels like a boring system to follow constantly.

4.6.3 What are the positive aspects of working with alternative material?
Mattias states that he likes to get alternative tasks from his teacher because it feels stimulating to work with something that his teacher has compiled by herself, having his and his classmates’ needs in mind. Every task which his teacher gives him contains new topics and the ways of working are always a little different. He likes the variation, both the ways of working and the new topics. As a consequence, he claims that “it becomes more personal and inspiring for me to learn English”.

4.6.4 What are the negative aspects of working with alternative material?
Mattias points out that it can often be fuzzy when he gets a new task to work with from his teacher due to the fact that he and his classmates do not understand the instructions. Every new task has new instructions and a lot of time is spent discussing with his teacher before his class can start to work with the task. Moreover, it sometimes happens that his teacher has problems structuring some tasks because she changes some details when they have started to work, which is irritating for Mattias and his classmates. Moreover, he does not always know how much it takes from him to get a certain grade even though his teacher hands out criteria for the task. With textbooks he knows exactly what it takes from him to get certain grades. Lastly, Mattias explains that he and his classmates do not always take tasks seriously. This is bad because it influences his grade and he tries to improve this. However, when his classmates do not take it seriously it also influences him because when they have discussions Mattias does not get any response from the rest of the class, which feels bad.
5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate what teachers and students considered to be the positive or negative aspects of using textbooks and alternative material. In order to reach this aim I interviewed three teachers and three students. The results were interesting and there were some patterns which will be presented in the following subsections.

5.1 Textbooks

All three teachers emphasized the fact that using textbooks saves them a lot of time. This is in line with what is expressed by Woodward (2001: 146), McKenzie (1997 [www]) and Richards (2001:1 [www]) who also claim that textbooks are timesavers for teachers. Furthermore, two teachers pointed out that textbooks are important to work with in the classroom because weak learners feel more secure working with textbooks due to the better guidance of what to do. They accomplish more when they are working with textbooks than alternative material. One negative aspect which was brought up was that textbooks idealize western perspectives and cultures whereas other cultures are portrayed as inferior. Moreover, women are not portrayed as equal to men. This agrees with Richards (2001:2 [www]) and Johnsen (1993:109), who also point out that textbooks may contain biases. Another negative aspect which two teachers emphasized was that textbooks tend to lack good communicative exercises. The communicative exercises in the textbooks are often too poor and made up. Moreover, they do not involve real-life issues and discussions where students can give their opinions about various matters.

In the interviews both teachers and students mentioned that textbooks can be boring and two of the students explained how they lacked current topics. This agrees with Harmer (1998:116-117) and Richards (2001:2 [www]). The problem of boring textbooks can be related to the importance of motivation (Brown 2000: 14; Yule 1996:192).

One positive aspect brought up in the student interviews was that it is positive to work with textbooks due to control. Two students said that they find it secure to work with textbooks because they know exactly what to do and can work in advance if they plan to be busy later. By having all material in one book, students feel that they are in control of their learning (as described by Woodward 2001: 146).

5.2 Alternative material

One aspect brought up in the teacher interviews was that teaching with alternative material is positive due to the fact that one can use material that contains current topics. These can be
snippets from newspapers or any other medium. Since textbooks lack current topics it is a great opportunity to use alternative material in order to fulfill this gap. One teacher explained how he like the freedom of being able to choose whatever he likes when teaching with alternative material. This teacher chooses novels or newspaper articles which he finds interesting. This is one clear and important positive aspect of teaching with alternative material, which corresponds with Harmer (1998: 116-117). Teachers can use a great variety of alternative material which is current; it can be related to events that have taken place the day before class. As Olle said, if he can capture the students’ interests and needs it is much easier to work with them. Again, this can be related to the importance of motivation (Brown 2000: 14).

However, there were also negative aspects of teaching with alternative material. Two teachers claimed that the workload becomes too big and it takes too much time, something commented on by, for instance, Christenbury (1994: 77), Richards (2001: 1 [www]) and Woodward (1987: 511). Moreover, another negative aspect brought up in the teacher interviews was that there is not enough time to check the quality of all material that is used.

The students all liked working with alternative material due to interesting topics, the possibility of choosing topics themselves and the fact that they can give ideas of their own to their teachers. One student emphasized the fact that he likes the variation when working with alternative material, because every new task is about new topics and the way of working is a bit different. However, the students also pointed out some negative aspects of working with alternative material. For instance, texts and articles on the Internet are not always true. As a consequence, one must constantly watch out for fake material, a problem which does not exist when working with textbooks. This is one important conclusion that is serious and very obvious. Teachers must be aware of the fact that there is much fake material on the Internet and they must constantly help their students when they are working. Moreover, one of the students pointed out that working with alternative material takes much more time. More questions have to be asked about the projects he and his class are working with. My conclusion is that teachers need more training in teaching with alternative material and how to give instructions because many students may have problems adopting new ways of working. Moreover, they need more time to be able to plan and work out instructions for students in order not to lose even more time when students ask about the instructions.
5.3 Concluding remarks
By using qualitative interviews I got the information I wanted. The interviews were long and very informative. It was a great strength to be able to ask further questions and to ask my informants to explain matters further. One weakness of using qualitative interviews, however, is that I did not reach as many people as I would have if I had used a questionnaire or made several shorter interviews. However, the teachers have a long experience as English teachers and the students were very active in the interviews. Furthermore, I got more detailed data due to the fact that I concentrated on six informants.

One unforeseen problem is that answers can be greatly influenced by what kind of textbooks or alternative material one has in mind. For instance, there are two different kinds of textbooks, which Grant (1990: 12-14) also shows, traditional and communicative textbooks and there is alternative material compiled by the teacher and material compiled by the students themselves and of various kinds etc. This is something that could have been discussed in the interviews, and I could have asked my informants to show me some of the material they are using.

Finally, this study might be interesting and of relevance to teachers, teacher trainees and students since it brings forth many different positive and negative aspects of teaching with textbooks and alternative material. This can make people work with textbooks and alternative material in a better way and try to find ways to improve the negative aspects. However, this study is not normative and I do not claim that one way is better than the other. There are positive and negative aspects to both sides which makes it complicated for the teacher when he/she is to make choices, as mentioned in the introduction. Lastly, it would be interesting to make a similar study, using a quantitative method with a larger number of informants in order to see if the results would be similar. Moreover, it would be interesting to focus on teachers who only use textbooks or alternative material and to see their views and arguments for their choice of teaching.
6. List of References


Interview guide appendix

Information
- This is an interview for my C-essay in English
- You will be anonymous in this essay
- I will be impartial and not judge your answers or thoughts
- The interview will be held in Swedish and translated into English by me afterwards

Background questions (for teachers)
- How long have you been a teacher?
- Could you tell me about the school (Size, profile, programs)
- What courses/programs do you teach/attend?

General questions
- Do you have an email address or a mobile number if I have further questions?
- Can I use a mini-disc recorder?

My main questions
(1) What positive aspects are there when teaching/learning English with textbooks/alternative material?
(2) What negative aspects are there when teaching/learning English with textbooks/alternative material?
(3) What do you think about texts, listening, speaking and writing exercises in textbooks/alternative material? Positive and negative aspects?

Support questions
- Could you explain this further……
- Could you give any examples……
- Could you develop this……
- How……
- Why……
- When…..