Pupil beliefs versus teacher assumptions –
the idea of the “perfect English lesson”.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

There are many theories about how foreign language learners prefer to be taught and about how they actually learn the target language. Some of the theories are closely linked to the motivation of the learners while others rely upon how different people believe learners learn or acquire language in general, that is different language acquisition theories. This topic is of great interest both to people who already are teachers as well as to other people who are involved in school activities, such as principals, teachers, students et cetera. It is important for teachers to know the preferences and beliefs of the pupils so that the lessons can provide the pupils with both knowledge and an enjoyable time. This will then turn out to be a favourable climate for language acquisition, the pupils will feel relaxed, and learning will become easier. With the latest curriculum, Lpo 94, learner autonomy came into focus. It is my belief that pupils will try harder and feel a greater motivation if they have had something to say about what they are supposed to learn. It is equally important to give the pupils meta-linguistic awareness and knowledge, as this will help them focus on their language and provide them with useful tools for talking about their preferences.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this essay is to find out what different age groups of pupils believe is the “perfect English lesson” and what a few English teachers believe about the same topic. What types of exercises and/or activities do the pupils seem to prefer? Are they the same for different age groups? How do the ideas of the pupils “fit” into what the curriculum and the English syllabus say? Do teachers have the same beliefs as the pupils? Which language acquisition theories seem to have the greatest influence in school today?
First, some information about what the curriculum and the syllabus states about English in school will be given. After that, some theories about language acquisition will be discussed. Then there will be a shorter explanation about pupil beliefs and teacher assumptions and after that, the results of the interviews will be presented. (Since all interviews were made in Swedish, the answers have been translated into English by the author of this essay alone. Any eventual mistakes are therefore due to that fact and nothing else.) Finally, there will be a discussion about the conclusions drawn from the study.

The hypotheses that will be tested are as follows: The older a pupil is – the more preferences he or she will express. The youngest pupils will not have the same preferences as the older pupils have. Not many of the pupils will express a positive attitude about “grammar exercises”. The teachers’ answers will reflect one of the language acquisition theories more than they will reflect the others. The teachers’ assumptions will differ from each other’s as well.

### 1.3 Method

Thirty-four different pupils have participated in the study and they come from one school located in a small town in the middle of Sweden. The pupils have been chosen from three age groups or classes: 13-year-olds (grade 7), 14-year-olds (grade 8) and 15-year-olds (grade 9). The interviews were made in Swedish, separately with each pupil and the following questions were asked: “When you leave an English-lesson and feel that you have learnt a lot, how did that lesson look like?” and “What types of activities do you believe that you learn the most from?” (My translation).

Six English teachers were interviewed in Swedish and the question they answered was: “In your opinion, how should an English lesson be for the pupils to learn as much as possible?” (My translation).
2. BACKGROUND

2.1 What Do the Curriculum and the Syllabus Say?

It is explicitly stated in the latest curriculum (LPO-94) that; “each student, after finishing the nine-year compulsory school, knows how to communicate both orally and in writing in English” (LPO-94, p. 25, under “Goals to achieve at compulsory school”) (My translation). It also says that each student “should have developed an understanding for other cultures” (LPO-94, p.25, under “Goals to achieve at compulsory school”) (My translation). These two points are especially relevant for foreign language teachers and their pupils. One might consider them meaningful in the language classroom, although they do not explicitly state how we are supposed to achieve these goals.

If we look at the syllabus for the school-subject English there are several points worth noticing:

“At the end of the ninth school-year, the pupils should have achieved:

- A clear understanding of (even somewhat regionally coloured) speech in instructions, tales and descriptions, which considers well-known states and areas of individual interest
- The ability to actively participate in conversations concerning well-known subjects and (with the help of different strategies) make a contribution to a functioning conversation
- The ability to read and profit by simpler fictional literature and other narratives, descriptive and argumentative texts which concern well-known subject areas
- The ability to request and provide written information and narrate and describe something
- The ability to reflect upon and draw conclusions about their ways and methods of learning English”

(English syllabus, p. 3, my translation).
The first four points (or goals) listed above concerns the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The last chosen point, together with the following goal; “Yet another competence is an awareness about how languages are learnt” (English syllabus, p. 2, my translation), bring us straight to the theories about language acquisition.

2.2 Language Acquisition Theories

All of the following theories have been proposed to explain the learning mechanisms that are common to all second and foreign language learners (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:35).

- **Behaviourism**: this theory is a psychological theory that was very influential in the 1950s and, as the name implies, the focus is on people's behaviours. The psychologist B.F. Skinner proposed a model of language acquisition within this theory. Traditionally, the belief was that learning happens when children imitate, practice, form habits and receive responses when they are successful. (Fromkin et al, 2003:342-343). Behaviourists believed that all learning takes place through the same underlying processes. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:35).

  When it comes to second or foreign language acquisition, the thought is that:

  “Because language development is viewed as the formation of habits, it is assumed that a person learning a second language starts off with the habits formed in the first language and that these habits interfere with the new ones needed for the second language”

  (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:35)

Behaviourism was often linked to something called the *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis* (CAH) and this deal with similarities between the first language and the target language. The CAH is supposed to predict some of the errors people make in learning a second or foreign language. However, even though a learner’s first language influences the
acquisition of a second or foreign language, researchers have found that not all errors predicted by the CAH are actually made and, furthermore, some of the errors which are made are not predictable from the CAH. Today, behaviourism is considered as an incomplete explanation for language learning. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:35-36).

- **Innatism:** The linguist Noam Chomsky proposed this theory around late 1950’s-early 1960’s in reaction to the behaviourist theory, since he considered that theory inadequate. Chomsky’s basic claim is that “children are biologically programmed for language and that language develops in the child just the same way that other biological functions develop.” (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:15). Chomsky talks about ‘the logical problem of language acquisition’ which refers to the fact that children come to know more about the structure of their language than they should, on the basis of the language they hear. There is also evidence that children are not systematically instructed or corrected on language and this has led Chomsky to claiming that children are born with the ability to discover the underlying rules of their language system. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:15-16).

  The term *Universal Grammar* (UG) is used to refer to this innate ability. UG is considered to be a set of principles which are common to all languages and the thought is that if children are pre-equipped with it, they only have to learn how their own language use these principles. Chomsky pointed out that children all over the world seem to develop their different languages in similar ways. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:17). Although this theory was not specifically claimed for second or foreign language learning, some linguists argue that since there still is the logical problem of (second) language acquisition, UG must be available both to first and second or foreign language learners. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:36-37).
Another very influential innatist theory of second or foreign language acquisition is Stephen Krashen’s ‘monitor model’. It consists of five hypotheses, which he claims are consistent with research findings from a number of different domains. These are the hypotheses as they are presented in Lightbown/Spada’s book on pages 38-40:

1: **The acquisition-learning hypothesis**: learners *acquire* a second or foreign language as they are exposed to samples of the target language they understand. They *learn* via a conscious process of study and attention to form and rule learning. Krashen claimed that the most important process is acquisition and he asserts that learning can not turn into acquisition.

2: **The monitor hypothesis**: the acquired system is used for conversation and it is responsible for fluency and intuitive judgements about correctness. The learned system only acts as a monitor and makes minor changes of what the acquired system has produced. Krashen also specified that learners use the monitor when they are more focused on being correct than on what they are saying.

3: **The natural order hypothesis**: Krashen observed that second language learners seem to acquire features of the target language in predictable sequences, just as first language learners do. Furthermore, he observed that the natural order does not depend on the order in which rules have been learned in language classes.

4: **The input hypothesis**: Krashen claims that people only acquire language in one way and that is by exposure to comprehensible input. The input should contain forms and structures just above the current level of the learner’s competence (which he calls ‘i+1’), then both comprehension and acquisition will occur.

5: **The affective filter hypothesis**: learners have an imaginary barrier which prevents them from acquiring language from the available input. This is due to different things like motives, needs, attitudes and emotional states. The affective filter may be up when a
learner is tense, angry or tired and then it blocks the input and no acquisition takes place. However, when a learner is relaxed and motivated, it will be down and acquisition will take place.

Krashen’s theory has been very influential in supporting communicative language teaching, but it has also been criticized for not proposing hypotheses that can be empirically tested. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999: 40).

The following are examples of more recent psychological theories.

- **Information processing**: cognitive psychologists who work in this model of human performance and learning usually see language acquisition as “the building up of knowledge systems that can eventually be called on automatically for speaking and understanding” (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:41). The basic idea is that learners pay attention to what they are trying to understand, then they will gradually become able to use certain parts of their knowledge without being aware of doing so. If there has been enough practice, these skills can eventually be available automatically.

  Richard Schmidt is one theorist who has emphasized the role of ‘noticing’ in second or foreign language acquisition. His view sharply contrasts with Krashen’s views in that he argues that everything we come to know about the language was noticed consciously by us. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:41).

- **Connectionism**: their argument is that the role of the environment is more important than any innate knowledge. They mean that the only thing that is innate is the ability to learn - not any specific linguistic structure. They argue that learners build up their knowledge of language gradually as they are exposed to more and more of the linguistic features they come to learn. To connectionists, input is the principal source of linguistic knowledge, while innatists see input as a ‘trigger’ to activate the innate knowledge. Connectionists mean that learners develop stronger and stronger mental connections between language
features in specific situational or linguistic contexts based on how often they hear them. Connectionists hypothesize that language acquisition does not need a separate part of the brain, it can be explained in terms of general learning. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:22 and 42).

- **The interactionist position:** some of these theories have been developed within second or foreign language research itself, even though they have been influenced by psychological learning theories. Michael Long is one of the persons that have argued that much second or foreign language acquisition takes place through interaction with others in conversations. He agrees with Krashen’s ideas that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition, but he is more interested in *how* input is made comprehensible. He claims that learners mostly need an opportunity to interact with other speakers, and not necessarily only receive input in simplified linguistic forms. He also says that research has shown that native speakers of a language consistently modify their speech when they talk to non-native speakers, until the non-native speaker shows signs of understanding. (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:42-43). Long summarizes the relationship between modified input and language acquisition as follows:

1. Interactional modification makes input comprehensible
2. Comprehensible input promotes acquisition
3. (Therefore) Interactional modification promotes acquisition

   (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:43).

Modified interaction may also include other elaboration, slower speech rate, gestures and so on. Some examples are comprehension checks (where the native speaker makes sure the learner has understood), clarification requests (where the learner tries to get the native speaker to clarify something) and self-repetition or paraphrasing (where the native speaker
Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of human mental processing (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:23) is another perspective within the interactionist position. His theory assumes that all cognitive development arises as a result of social interactions. Jim Lantoff and others who have extended Vygotsky’s theory to second or foreign language acquisition (Lightbown/Spada, 1999:44) claim that second or foreign language learners advance to higher levels when they interact with people who are more knowledgeable than themselves. The difference between this view and that of other interactionists is that:

“Sociocultural theorists assume that language acquisition actually takes place in the interactions of learner and interlocutor, whereas other interactionist models assume that input modification provides learners with the linguistic raw material which they will process internally and invisibly”

(Lightbown/Spada, 1999:44).

As can be noticed from all the theories, there are a number of different views of how language acquisition takes place. Some of them are similar, or use different parts of another theory, while others are direct opposites of each other. For teachers, it could be useful to have an idea of them and then try to adjust the teaching to the actual group and its individuals, because every person is unique and learns in different ways. At the least the theories may provide teachers with a basis for their reflections about teaching.

**2.3 Pupil beliefs**

All of the pupils in this study have studied English for about four to six years so they will have made their own beliefs about how the ‘perfect English lesson’ should be. For teachers, it
is important to know the beliefs of the pupils. That knowledge may aid the teacher in planning lessons, choosing activities et cetera.

“Learners’ beliefs are influenced by the social context of learning and can influence both their attitude toward the language itself as well as toward language learning in general. Learners’ belief systems cover a wide range of issues and can influence learners’ motivation to learn, their expectations about language learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult about a language, as well as the kind of learning strategies they favour.”

(Richards & Lockhart, 1996:52)

Pupils often have strong opinions about which aspects of English they find difficult and easy and they may have views about appropriate classroom behaviour. Pupils could also have beliefs about language, which may be reflected in assumptions about the nature of the four language skills; some might find it a waste of time for them individually to perform certain tasks. “Students bring to the classroom very specific assumptions about how to learn a language and about the kinds of activities and approaches they believe to be useful” (Richards & Lockhart, 1996:52-54). Now, it is not so difficult to understand why it is both important and useful for teachers to try to find out the beliefs of their pupils.

**2.4 Teacher assumptions**

There are many dimensions of teaching, for example selecting learning activities, asking questions, conducting drills, monitoring pupil’s learning, giving feedback on pupil learning, reviewing and reteaching when necessary and so on. When we try to understand how teachers deal with the different dimensions of teaching, we must examine the beliefs that underlie their actions in the classroom. This view of teaching involves three dimensions: a behavioural, a cognitive and an affective dimension. This idea is based on the assumption that what teachers do is a reflection of what they know and believe. That knowledge is the underlying
framework that guides the teacher’s actions in the classroom. (Richards & Lockhart, 1996:29).

Teachers’ belief systems have been built up over time and research on them suggests that they have derived from several different sources. Here are some examples of those sources: their own experience as language learners, experience of what works best, established practice on their school and personality factors of the teachers. Teachers may have different beliefs about English, about learning and teaching as well as about the program and the curriculum. (Richards & Lockhart, 1996:30-39).

Some might consider English as the language of business and money, others as the language of literature. Teachers’ beliefs about learning may be based on their own experience as language learners or on their training, and their beliefs might differ a lot from that of their pupils. Since teaching is a personal activity, individual teachers have very different beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching. Then there are differences in the culture of schools, as well as differences in how different teachers interpret the culture of their schools. (Richards/Lockhart, 1996:30-39).

3. RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

3.1 13-year-olds

*Girl no 1:* This girl stated that it was important that there was silence in the classroom. Then she said that she wanted to do a variety of activities and exercises and that she thought that they should be efficient and enjoyable. She wanted to play different language games and move around, but it should be controlled games, so the pupils would remain calm. She mentioned “Pictionary” as an example of this.
Boy no 1: This boy said he preferred to read aloud, to translate different texts and to watch TV-programs and movies without subtitles. He also thought different grammar exercises were important.

Boy no 2: He said that it was important that everyone in the classroom was calm and quiet, otherwise he could not concentrate on working. He mentioned that it was important that the teacher was funny and knew how to give them different activities. He did not like to do the same thing repeatedly. He mentioned that he wanted to speak in front of the whole class, to listen to the others and to watch movies with English subtitles and then talk about the movie.

Boy no 3: This boy said that he wanted the classroom to be in silence and that he liked to write texts and to practice his reading ability on different texts.

Girl no 2: This girl said that she wanted peace and silence in the classroom. She said that her favourite exercises were different ones with different levels of difficulty. She preferred to read different texts and answer questions related to the texts.

Boy no 4: He needed to have silence around him and he wanted everyone to listen to the person who was talking. He did not like to do too much of the same; he liked to do many different exercises.

Boy no 5: He said that it was important that the lesson was funny and enjoyable. He wanted to do a variety of different activities, for example play games, and watch movies either with English subtitles or without them. He also liked to read aloud and to listen to the other pupils reading and he did not like to only read from the textbook and then practice the glossary.

Boy no 6: This boy said that all the pupils should be calm and that the teacher should be very clear and able to make thorough explanations. Sometimes he liked the teacher to go through things on the whiteboard, other times he liked to read, translate lyrics or speak with a friend. He also liked different games.
Girl no 3: She said that she preferred to read different texts and answer questions related to the texts, to practice her reading ability.

Boy no 7: He said that he liked when everyone was calm and quiet and he could do many different exercises.

Boy no 8: This boy said that he needed peace and he wanted the teacher to speak English all the time, except if Swedish was necessary for them to understand. He liked to read aloud and listen to other pupils doing the same and he enjoyed different language games because he thought they made the lessons funnier and easier.

Boy no 9: The last of the 13-year-olds said that he preferred when everyone was calm and silent so he could read different texts and answer questions related to them.

3.2 14-year-olds

Boy no 1: This boy said that he preferred it when he could do some research about a project because he liked to search for facts and to write a lot. He liked to present his project in front of the class afterwards. He also enjoyed watching “difficult” movies without subtitles so he could listen to the language.

Boy no 2: He said that he liked to search facts about something and then present it for the others and he also liked to read texts, if he thought the texts were interesting.

Boy no 3: He liked to read texts in the textbook and practice the glossary, he enjoyed watching movies with English subtitles and he liked to talk, especially debate.

Boy no 4: This boy said that he preferred to translate texts, both from Swedish to English and the other way around. He also believed that grammar exercises were interesting and he liked to describe things and persons orally to other pupils. He also liked to search for facts and present the results nicely.
Girl no 1: She liked to work in groups and search facts for projects. She enjoyed reading silently and then talking about the text either with a friend or in front of the whole class. She also liked to speak and said that it was necessary for her pronunciation.

Boy no 5: This boy said that he needed silence in the classroom and he really liked to write especially essays. He also liked to watch movies with English subtitles and after the movie, he wanted to answer questions related to the movie.

Boy no 6: He said he believed different grammar exercises were the best way for him to learn. He wanted the teacher to present an area on the whiteboard, and then he wanted to practice and finish with speaking about it with a friend.

Boy no 7: He said that he needed peace in the classroom and he wanted the teacher to explain most of the things they were working with. He liked to read different texts, learn new words, and practice the glossary.

Girl no 2: She preferred different games because they made her feel more relaxed. She mentioned Bingo and different language games and to watch movies. She also liked to read in the textbook and practice the glossary.

Girl no 3: She said that she wanted the lessons to be fun. She liked to listen to different tapes and answer questions afterwards. She enjoyed different worksheets when she was learning the glossary and she liked to read different texts.

Girl no 4: This girl said that she could not focus on working if the other pupils were not calm and silent. She preferred to write much and to read aloud. She thought that it was nice to listen to the other pupils reading and she liked to practice on speaking. She also liked to read in the textbook and learn the glossary.
3.3 15-year-olds

**Girl no 1:** She said that she wanted the other pupils to be quiet and the activities should be varied. She enjoyed reading in silence, speaking, but not in front of the whole class. She also wanted the teacher to go through things on the whiteboard and explain things well.

**Boy no 1:** He said that he liked to listen a lot, both to the teacher and to the other pupils. He liked to practice communicating with others. He also said that he did not like to write at the same time as the teacher was talking; he found it difficult to do both things at the same time, since it made him loose his attention.

**Girl no 2:** This girl said that she thought that it was important that the lessons were fun too. She liked to write, but not too much, she wanted the lessons to be more varied. She wanted to watch movies with English subtitles, play different language games and play theatre. She wanted to practice the play in English and then perform it as well.

**Girl no 3:** She said that she liked to read if she was interested in what the message of the text was. She also believed that it was important to have an interest in the subject itself, otherwise she did not believe that any learning happened. She also liked to write short stories. She said that she did not like to do lots of worksheets and grammar exercises.

**Girl no 4:** This girl said that she liked to read pop-lyrics and translate them, both from Swedish to English and the other way around. She also liked different kinds of games, both language games and more relaxed games. She enjoyed watching movies without subtitles.

**Girl no 5:** She said that she liked the most to search for facts for a project and then present it both in writing and orally for the other pupils. She also liked it when the teacher explained things on the whiteboard, she thought she understood much faster then. She liked to speak to other pupils and to listen to them as well.

**Boy no 2:** He said that he liked to work hard during the lessons, preferably with grammar exercises. He also liked to listen to conversations and to translate different texts.
Boy no 3: He said that he liked to do grammar exercises on worksheets, not in the book. He liked to speak and read aloud. He did not like it when the teacher spoke English all the time.

Boy no 4: He said that his favourite exercise was to read a text and answer tricky questions related to the text. He liked to learn new words and to practice the glossary.

Boy no 5: This boy said that he liked to write, mostly short stories. He also liked to work with worksheets and to do grammar exercises in the workbook. He also liked to read but he did not like all the glossaries in the textbook. He also liked to translate different texts and to watch movies without subtitles.

Boy no 6: He said that he liked to watch movies without subtitles, or English subtitles if the language was too difficult. He wanted to answer questions after the movie and that all the pupils and the teacher would discuss the movie afterwards.

3.4 The teachers

Female no 1: She said that she preferred to give the pupils different activities, so that all of them would have a chance to perform well. The verbal pupils should speak, the visual pupils should be able to watch or look at something and so on. She said that she thought that it was important to try to get everyone in the class involved. She believed that the students learnt a lot from each other, so she often let them work in pairs. Usually they practised dialogues and different kinds of problem solving in pairs. An example of problem solving could be to find all verbs in a certain tense in a text. She wanted her pupils to do a variety of exercises and activities because she believed that would increase their ability to understand the language.

Female no 2: This teacher speaks English all the time in the classroom, and the pupils listen a lot and they are used to hearing spoken English. She works a lot with the pupils to try to make them feel secure enough to speak and read aloud. She uses many different worksheets, which she has adjusted to fit the level of the pupils. She tries to give them individual tasks since they
are on very different levels. She usually gives the pupils many short exercises in order to keep
them concentrated and focused. She could present something on the whiteboard for a few
minutes, then they might read a short text, followed by some writing or speaking about the
text. Usually each activity lasts no longer than fifteen minutes, that is the time limit she thinks
they are able to maintain their interest in the activities.

**Female no 3:** She said that she speaks both English and Swedish in the classroom since not
everyone would understand everything in English. She uses the whiteboard quite often to try
to explain different thing to her pupils. She believes that it is important to try to make the
lessons fun to so she uses a variety of activities. The pupils read a lot, they have their fictional
books, which they read and then write about. They also watch movies and work with different
grammar exercises on worksheets.

**Female no 4:** This teacher said that she speaks English in the classroom and her pupils usually
speak a lot. When they are working with a text and a glossary, they usually discuss that in
pairs or in small groups. She believes that it is important to have varied lessons both for the
pupils’ interest and because it is good to practice all skills. She thinks that it is important to
work a lot with communication in the classroom. Usually the pupils have short writing
activities and she feels that there is not enough time to collect and correct as much as she
would like to. She also mentions that her pupils likes to do crosswords and watch movies, but
she does not think that those activities are very useful, except for fun and to relax with. She
uses the text- and work books a lot with the 13-year-olds to make them familiar with the
routines of bringing the book with them. The 14-year-olds do not use the books all the time;
she said that they get bored if they use them too often. They prefer worksheets and other texts.
The 15-year-olds usually read a lot of fiction and write and discuss that. She varies the
exercises with the level of the group.
Female no 5: She said that she preferred to work with many different items, not concentrating one lesson to one item. The pupils were more motivated and kept their concentration better when they had varied exercises. She liked to try to give them different ways to work with the same item, grammar exercises could be done individually, in pairs or in groups, in writing or orally et cetera. She would prefer it if each student came to know his or her weaknesses and strengths and tried to work with those on their own. However, she said that they still have a long way to go until they are at that point! When she noticed that the pupils seemed tired or unfocused she tried to have a short “fun break” and maybe someone could tell a funny story or do something else just for fun. She believed that they worked better again after such a short break. She also pointed out that she believed that it is important to “give and take” in the classroom, especially with the 15-year-olds. Mutual respect is important and to listen to each other.

Male teacher: This teacher said that he worked a lot with the atmosphere of the classroom. He wanted the pupils to feel secure and relaxed because he believed this to be a condition of all sorts of learning. He did not believe in drilling the pupils constantly, he wanted them to feel tired but pleased when they left his lessons. They should feel like they had worked hard and made progress. He stressed the fact that he believed in having a good contact with the pupils. That would lead to an open atmosphere in the classroom, which in turn would make learning easier. He still believed that he should be “in control”, but together with the pupils, not against them. He also said that “unfortunately, you can not get through to every pupil, but if the group atmosphere is good it may at least ease learning for everyone”. As for activities he believed in variation, he wanted to make the pupils practise all four skills. He said that one month he could emphasize communication, and do less writing, reading and listening but they would still be present. He summoned up his thoughts by saying that it was very important to get to know your pupils, both as a group and as individuals.
4. DISCUSSION

As we can see from the interviews most of the pupils have similar ideas. That is probably because they have been trained in the same school tradition. Some of the answers were quite expected from the pupils, for example the ones the said that they liked to watch movies and play games and that the lessons should be fun. One reason for that is probably because the pupils feel relaxed and they probably see these activities mostly as fun and enjoyable ones. They may believe that they are just relaxing, but if the activities following the movie or the games are well thought through, then I believe that they could learn a lot from those. One could ask them to look for idioms and certain expressions in the movie and try to find out in what contexts they can and can not be used. Alternatively, one could ask them to focus on a special part of the movie and try to retell what happened, et cetera. The important thing to do as a teacher is to work with the movie and the games, both before and after the pupils do them.

This could be a part of behaviourism; if we form these good habits of working this way and then give positive responses, learning could take place. It could also be a part of “modern” thinking expressed in the English syllabus, that each pupil should “deepen his or her ability to understand spoken English in different situations and contexts” (p.1, my translation). Movies, which are carefully chosen, could easily provide the pupils with lots of useful information, for example about other cultures. The curriculum states that “the school should strive to help each pupil develop the ability to enter into and understand other people’s situation […]” (LPO-94, p. 23-24. My translation.)

Other answers that were not so expected were the ones saying that they liked to read aloud and speak in front of the whole class. I thought that most pupils found these activities quite embarrassing and therefore did not like them, but apparently, some pupils like them.
Maybe it is the pupils that are good at speaking English that like them, or it could be the ones that believe that they are good at speaking English that like them? On the other hand, it could be that the teachers have been successful in creating a good and safe environment where the pupils feel relaxed enough to try to speak although they may not be native-like. I hope that it is the last answer that is the “right” one! Many of the pupils mentioned that they liked to search for facts about a project and then present that orally to the whole class. Boy no.3 among the 14-year-olds mentioned that he preferred to debate a subject in the classroom. This could be seen as working towards another goal expressed in the syllabus. Namely the one saying that “each pupil should develop their ability to use English orally in different contexts to narrate something, to describe things and to explain and motivate their opinions. (English syllabus, p.1. My translation). These activities go together with the interactionist position and Krashen’s thoughts about comprehensible input.

I was expecting some pupils to answer that they believed that grammar exercises were good for learning. I think this depends on two things; first grammar exercises are usually “more of the same”, once you have learnt them, it is easy to keep doing them. They do not demand too much of an effort from pupils who master them successfully. Second, I believe that many parents ask their children about grammar exercises and they are probably willing to help them with those exercises at home. This is because when they were learning English at school, grammar exercises were frequently used and parents tend to ask for them. Since they believe that they learned English with the help of those, their children will also benefit from them. It is in many peoples’ opinion something that can not be left out from English teaching and learning. Eriksson and Tholin (1997:99) mention that parents may become worried and question the teaching their children receive if they can not “see” how their children are learning grammar. It is important to explain that grammar is important and has its place in the subject, but the goal is linguistic correctness, not the ability to rattle off all the rules in
English. (My translation). This would be closest to the innatist position and the thoughts about *Universal grammar*. The pupils who like these types of exercises could have a greater access to their UG than the ones who do not like grammar exercises. There is nothing explicitly stated in the syllabus about grammar exercises so it is up to each school to decide how to work with the rules of English.

Some of the pupils expressed the desire to read texts that they found interesting. This is also clearly expressed in the English syllabus:

> “The education will have its basis in meaningful and interesting contents. The pupils will develop their language ability by listening to, and reading about things that concern and engage them and by using the language to express their own thoughts in speaking and writing. The linguistic and social interplay has an important role here.” (English syllabus, p. 16-17).

This idea probably comes from some of the more recent psychological theories, more specifically connectionism, which sees input as the principal source of linguistic knowledge. It is also very close to the interactionist position, which focuses on linguistic and social interplay, especially Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. The teachers seem to have these theories in the back of their heads when planning their lessons. Most of them said that their pupils both hear a lot of English as well as speak a lot themselves and this supports the ideas of these theories. The teachers seem to think about the four skills when planning their lessons and they seem to work hard with their pupils’ motivation and the class atmosphere. They all seem to be aware of the goals stated in the curriculum and the English syllabus, at least if we look at the pupils’ answers.

Both the teachers and the pupils seem to believe in varied lessons and a mix of exercises and activities. The thoughts about varying the lessons are important for the belief
that pupils learn more when they are interested and feel that what they are doing is meaningful. Stern (1981, cited in Eriksson and Tholin, 1997:8) has said that; “a language is learned when the learner becomes involved in real communication” (My translation). That is completely in line with the ideas of the interactionist position, which focus on the importance of communication with others. Parts of it are linked to Krashen’s ideas about the necessity for comprehensible input while other parts are very close to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. I believe that these theories are the most influential ones in the school of today. Most classrooms are more or less communicatively based today and that is brought up in the English syllabus; “The education in English aims at developing an all-round communicative ability and adequate knowledge of the language for having international contacts, for an increasingly internationalised labour market […] and for future education”. (English syllabus, p. 1. My translation).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this essay was to find out what different age groups of pupils believe is the “perfect English lesson” and what a few English teachers believe about the same topic. From the pupils’ answers there can be no simple conclusions drawn. Every pupil has his or her own preferences and some of them like grammar exercises while others like to read, write, speak or watch movies. A variety of different types of activities and exercises in which the pupils can practice the four skills seem to be “the perfect English lesson, both from the pupils’ and the teachers’ point of view.

There seems to be no bigger differences between the age groups when it comes to the types of exercises and activities the pupils prefer. The ideas of the pupils fit well into what the English syllabus states about the following topics. The pupils’ ability to understand spoken
English in different situations and contexts, the ability to use English orally in different contexts and that the education should have its basis in meaningful and interesting contents.

The teachers share some beliefs with the pupils, for example the thoughts about varying the lessons, which they all seem to agree is important for learning to happen. They also differ in some beliefs, both from the pupils’ beliefs and from each other as well. Some of the teachers speak English in the classroom all the time which some of the pupils prefer them to do, while others mix English and Swedish and some pupils prefer that. That it up to each teacher to decide depending on the group as a whole, sometimes it is necessary to speak Swedish for all the pupils to understand.

The language acquisition theories that seem to have the greatest influence in school today are Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, Krashen’s thoughts about comprehensible input and the interactionist position. Those theories all support a communicatively based education.

I found no support for the following hypotheses: 1: the older a pupil is-the more preferences will he or she express. 2: the youngest pupils will not have the same preferences as the older pupils have. There did not seem to be any bigger differences between the age groups, the differences were individual. 3: Not many of the pupils will express a positive attitude about “grammar exercises”. Many of the pupils actually thought that grammar exercises are important for learning. 4: The teachers’ answers will reflect one of the language acquisition theories more than they will reflect the others. Actually, they seem to mix some of the theories so it was not one theory that they reflected more than any other one.

The following hypotheses could be said to be supported: 1: The teachers’ assumptions will differ from each other’s as well. They did have a few different thoughts about the lessons and they carried them out a bit differently. However, if that is due to group differences or not is left unsaid. 2: The teachers will probably have a communicatively based approach to their teaching. Yes, they seem to have that.
Being a teacher today is not the easiest thing. The demands are high on them to give each pupil what he or she needs and learner autonomy is in focus. Since all pupils are different from each other in some ways, they prefer different activities too. As a teacher the best way to try to help everyone develop their abilities in English is to vary the lessons and try to provide everyone with opportunities of success. The globalisation of the world has brought a need for people with communicative skills, and English is on the way to becoming “the business language of the world”. Teachers seem aware of this as they seem to base their teaching on communication.

What I missed in the study was to ask for the pupils’ metalinguistic awareness and ability. It would have been interesting to see how aware the pupils are about how they learn. Neither the pupils nor the teachers brought that up spontaneously in their answers and I should have asked about it. That could be an interesting thing to study further.
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