Is English in Swedish upper-secondary school different for students in different programs?

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Abstract

**Titel:** Is English in Swedish upper-secondary school different for students in different programs?

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My aim with this paper is to see whether there are any differences, when it comes to learning English, between students in practical and theoretical programs at upper secondary school in Sweden. I have looked at what differences there are when the students begin the programs and how the English A course differs in material, the students’ influence on their own studies and the atmosphere in the classrooms. Earlier studies have shown that adolescents from the lower social classes more often choose a practical program while students from higher social classes tend to choose a theoretical program. The students’ grades from lower-secondary school have an influence on the choice of program as well. Those with low grades from elementary school frequently choose a practical program whereas students with better grades more often choose a theoretical program. Though in my study, the students’ former grades did not differ that much. Further, studies have shown that students who would like to learn languages are divided into two types. The students are either so-called instrumental or integrative learners. My study showed that integrative exercises are used more often than instrumental exercises in upper-secondary school. Unfortunately, there are also some students that do not want to learn a second language at all and such students are in almost every class but they can be found more often in practical courses. To conclude, I found out in my study that there were differences between the courses in theoretical and practical programs. The differences affected the students in a way that made it easier to achieve a better grade in English in a theoretical program.

**Nyckelord:** English, practical programs, theoretical programs, upper-secondary school, second-language acquisition.
1. Introduction and aims

People learn languages differently depending on their social background, and it has been proven that a good environment can be crucial to a student’s learning ability. In school, students are supposed to have the same opportunities to learn, but this is not always the case as pupils are often judged as a group by the teacher and not as individuals. An example where the social background can play a very big part is when a teacher decides even before meeting a new class that the students are going to learn quickly or less quickly depending on what type of social group they belong to. When I first came into contact with this issue I started to wonder whether the distinction between practical and theoretical programs in Sweden influences teachers and their way of teaching. All students in upper-secondary school are faced with the same requirements in their first English course in 10th grade, English A, but do they really fulfil them and does everybody have the same opportunities to learn?

During one of my vocational training periods in an upper secondary school I noticed that students who had chosen a practical program were viewed as less intelligent, or less hardworking, by students that had chosen a more theoretical direction in their studies. I wanted to investigate if this view is shared by the teachers and if so, whether the teachers change the course content according to what kind of group they teach. Could it be true that teachers, too, judge the students depending on what kind of program they have chosen to study? If this turned out to be the case, another research question suggests itself: Is it easier to get a pass or a higher degree than a pass if one belongs to a certain group? These are questions difficult to answer and a very delicate subject to investigate, but in my view it is important to think about as a teacher. My aim with this paper was therefore to carry out a comparative study of the two kinds of programs at upper-secondary school in Sweden to see if there were any differences between the English courses and also to see if the differences have any effects on the students’ learning. I have limited my study by focusing on a number of classroom observations, taking into account findings from previous research.

Most probably teachers are aware of the differences among the students and use different course layouts in different classes in order to make all students learn as much as possible. But is it really better to have different approaches depending on what program the students have chosen? Do the students learn differently depending on what course they attend? As a first
step in my efforts to find out, I will give a background of what the situation is like in schools today and then take a look at some previous studies concerning learning.

2. Background

2.1 The difference between a theoretical and a practical program

A reform was introduced in Swedish upper-secondary school in 1994, which divided the educational system into two different kinds of programs: practical programs and theoretical programs. The reform was mainly in the terminology, using program instead of line, and as of years, previously students in practical programs had only done two while they now attend three. These programs are further divided into 17 specialised programs. Those who are tired of studying and want to get out on the job-market as soon as possible often choose a practical program. These students get more vocational training in their chosen field than students studying in a theoretical program. However, students in a practical program still have to study certain theoretical subjects in order to have a chance of being admitted to a university later in life, and one of these subjects is English (Fogelberg 2004:1).

2.2 Social backgrounds

According to Båsjö & Svensson (1999:5), people in Sweden are customarily divided into three different social groups, which are straightforwardly called social group 1, 2 and 3. In group 1 there are higher officials and successful business owners/farmers. Group 2 comprises the remaining officials and business owners/farmers. All employees without higher education are placed in group 3. A family’s social group is determined by the person who has the highest status, even if there are persons belonging to another group within the family.

People tend to think that the Swedish school system is equal and fair. Everyone, boys and girls, rich and poor, has to study, and therefore everyone has the same opportunities. This is true, but people forget that social class and gender have a certain influence on teenagers’ choice of education. The year students turn sixteen they have to choose if they are to attend a theoretical or a practical program. The students’ social background, gender and former grades often influence their choice of program (Båsjö & Svensson 1999:4f).
2.2.1 Differences between students

By comparing statistics on students beginning their upper-secondary education in 1993, Båsjö & Svensson (1999) found that students from social group 1 more often chose a theoretical program than a practical one. It was also evident that students from social group 3 chose a practical program more often than a theoretical program. But it was more difficult to see a pattern among students from social group 2, though in 1993, a slight majority chose a practical program. Since there are more people in social group 3 than in the other two one cannot conclude that a typical theoretical student comes from social group 1, nor that a typical student in a practical program comes from the lowest social group. Both kinds of programs have students from all social classes. The overall results are represented in Figure 1. *Natural science* and *Humanities and social sciences* designate theoretical programs.

![Figure 1. Distribution, in percent, between different programs among students beginning their upper-secondary education in the autumn of 1993 (based on Båsjö & Svensson 1999:4).](image)

There was also evidence that gender had an influence on the students’ choice. Girls in the theoretical programs more often chose humanities and social sciences as their major subjects while a majority of boys chose science. In the practical programs boys chose to have more vocational training in male-dominated fields, such as mechanics and electricity. Girls more often want work in female-dominated areas such as childcare or in the social services (Båsjö & Svensson 1999:4-5).

2.3 Drop-outs

Another study carried out by Ulla Lindqvist and Irene Wennemo (2004) shows that there are not only gender and social class problems with recruiting students to the different practical programs, but that the number of drop-outs has increased alarmingly in the last few years. In
the practical programs twice as many students as in the theoretical programs do not finish their studies. In some of the practical programs, more than 50 percent do not get their final diploma. One can compare this with the drop-outs in the natural science program, which is a line in the theoretical program, where only 13 percent do not finish their studies. What is more, it is more difficult for those who do finish their studies in a practical program to find a job afterwards than it is for their peers in a theoretical program. These facts are disquieting as there is going to be a lack of labour in childcare and the social services in a few years (Lindquist & Wennemo 2004).

There are also great differences between the grades obtained. Students in theoretical programs receive much higher grades in theoretical subjects than students in the other programs (Lindquist & Wennemo 2004). These subjects are also important when students apply to university or for a job. Many students in practical programs do not want to study but work and do not expect to have such a workload in the theoretical subjects as they do have. One reason behind the many drop-outs is that these students cannot cope with the amount of theoretical work. Even if the students like their chosen vocational field, and are good at it, they cannot reach the goals that the government has decided are necessary in the other fields. Therefore, it is now being questioned whether these students really should have to attain the same level of knowledge in theoretical subjects as their fellow students in a completely different program (Bergh 2005).

2.4 Grades
Another important factor that influences the students’ choice of program is their previous grades. At many schools in Sweden, a student can choose between a difficult and an easier course in English in lower-secondary school. According to a study done by Statistics Sweden (SCB), very few students in the theoretical programs have grades from the easier English course, whereas in the practical programs about half of an average class have studied in such a course (Reuterberg & Svensson 1998:18).

The students’ average grade also had quite an influence on the students’ choice of program. All students take at least 16 courses in lower-secondary school and by adding all the grades up and dividing the total by sixteen the students get their average grade. This grade compares the students when they apply to upper-secondary school. It is therefore better to have a high average grade than a low one when applying to a program with many applicants. Figure 2
shows students’ average grades from lower-secondary school and what kind of program they studied in upper-secondary school. In this table the old grading system is used, where 1 is the lowest grade and 5 the highest. S-NT stands for the natural science program and S-HSE stands for the humanities and social sciences program; both are theoretical programs. Y-NT and Y-HSE are vocational programs. In the former, students can choose to become car mechanics, electricians, constructors etc and in the latter they can choose to work with old people or children, for example.

Figure 2. The students’ average grades from lower-secondary school and their choice of program in upper-secondary school (Reuterberg & Svensson 1998).

This study focused on persons born in 1977, and it clearly shows that there is a relationship between the students’ grades and their choice of program. Students graduating from lower-secondary school with low grades mostly chose a practical program over a theoretical one and students with higher grades more often chose a theoretical program. One may be led to believe that this division among the students is due to the recruiting system. It is considered easier to get into a practical program than a theoretical one, but this is not always the case. In many schools there are so few applicants for the theoretical programs, compared to the number of students they are allowed to have, that the schools have lower demands in those programs than in some of the practical ones. Some practical programs also have few places on offer, which makes these places very attractive and consequently more difficult to be admitted to. Another reason why the recruiting system does not influence the students’ choice that much is that they have three choices and if they do not get into their first choice of program they get into their second or third; the students therefore have no reason not to try to get into a theoretical program. Students who have not obtained a passing grade in English, mathematics and Swedish cannot (normally) be admitted to a program but have to attend a special
education where they first pass these subjects; they are therefore not included in this study (Skolverket 2006).

It is important to understand that these studies do not show the students’ intelligence, but it indicates their previous motivation and abilities with respect to their studies. In a given class, the level of knowledge leads to differences between the students and it can be difficult to find exercises that fit all of them; it is thus necessary to try to motivate the students to learn. In the next section I will explain how motivation can affect the students’ grades.

### 2.5 Motivation

An important factor when it comes to why people learn is motivation, as it makes people interested in working and progressing within a subject. Motivation becomes important when there are students in a course that are not motivated, since these can get frustrated and even disturb other people in the class (Kees 2004). A lot of research has been carried out on the subject and I will here only consider motivation with respect to language learning. Motivation in language learning has been divided into two basic types depending on the students’ attitudes towards acquiring the new language: instrumental and integrative motivation (Brown 1987:115-117). When students learn a second language to have better career opportunities or to be capable to translate or read technical texts, applied linguistics speaks of instrumental motivation. However, when students want to be integrated in a society where the language is spoken, they have integrative motivation. Students with integrative motivation can further be divided into two groups. Those in the first group have the desire to be able to communicate with people speaking the second language. Important to note is that having this desire does not necessarily imply having direct contact with a native speaker. Therefore the group of students in a classroom that is interested in meeting people from other cultures could be very small. Students belonging to the second group want to integrate in the second language culture (Brown 1987:115-117).

### 2.6 Maslow’s five basic needs

A person has at least five basic needs, according to Abraham Maslow (1908-1970): physiological needs, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualization (Bautz 1984:19f). These needs can be taken in consideration when learning and I will use them when doing my study as they can affect the climate in the classroom.
2.6.1 Physiological needs

Most of the physiological needs are already taken care of when the students come to school. They have clothes on and eat lunch in the canteen, but there is at least one urge that has to be suppressed in the classroom, namely restlessness. It is not natural for people to sit still for one hour and listen to someone speaking. Therefore the teacher should remember to have a variety of tasks for the students to work with. The lesson plan should include some movement or change of work for the students to remain attentive (Bautz 1984:20f). But such suggestions are sometimes difficult to follow as a common opinion among teachers is that many pupils in practical programs like to have something recognisable to go back to and the students often demand a book to follow in the course. Teachers therefore find it difficult to vary the tasks as they feel bound to the coursebook. Another problem that can limit the amount of physical movement in class is the lack of concentration among the students if the classrooms get too noisy. If teachers start to move the students around too much, the noise levels will rise. The classroom can also get noisier if the students work with several tasks in one lesson, as many students start to speak with their friends while the teacher switches exercises and it takes a moment for them to settle down again (Eriksson & Miliander 1991:128).

2.6.2 Safety, belonging and esteem

The students need to feel secure among their classmates and, of course, with the teacher. If the students feel that they can be humiliated by either their peers or the teacher, they will try to avoid certain kinds of situations, e.g. by talking less (or more) during the lessons, or only in their mother tongue when they should be speaking English. The students also have to feel that they belong in the class. In order to create this feeling, it is wise to let the students work together and take responsibility for each other instead of letting them compete against their classmates.

Another basic need is self-esteem. Teachers should think about not correcting too harshly and perhaps let some mistakes pass through, e.g. mistakes that do not hinder comprehension, in order not to discourage the student. If they are corrected more gently, weaker students get more self-esteem and continue to make an effort (Bautz 1984:21). However, it may be difficult for a teacher to draw a line between what to correct and what not to correct, and there is always the risk of fossilisation.
2.6.3 Self-actualisation and learner autonomy

As everyone knows, students do not all have the same level of knowledge in a given subject when they begin a new class, and they will not all have the same level of knowledge when they take their finals, either. The teacher’s job is to help all students to progress the best they can with the help of different techniques and materials and to encourage the learners’ individual interests (Bautz 1984:20-21). This is easier said than done, but one suggested approach is learner autonomy. Learner autonomy does not mean that all students in the classroom have to work individually with different tasks and different material. Nor does it mean that the teacher decides what tasks the students should work with to improve their English. Instead the learners themselves have to take responsibility for their progress. For learner autonomy to work it is important for the learners to think about how they learn and what motivates them (Eriksson & Miliander 1991:20). The students do not have to work with different materials, but can set different goals and work with different kinds of tasks according to their ambition. Arguments against this way of learning can be that the students do not have any ideas themselves of what to do, that the classes become too noisy when many pupils work with different tasks, that it is difficult to make the students work efficiently in groups, and that the teacher has to bring a lot of material which is heavy to carry to the lessons (Eriksson & Miliander 1991:128).

As mentioned above, the teachers do not always know the best way for each student to learn but they can and should come up with ideas to help the students according to the ideas behind learner autonomy. That is why the teachers are in the classroom: they should help the students to learn. However, teachers cannot put knowledge into the students’ heads; that they have to do by themselves. It is true that the classroom can get noisy as the students work with different tasks, but the level of noise depends a lot on the teacher’s limits of tolerance. In some schools, there are also libraries, small group rooms and computer rooms that the pupils can use if they want to (Eriksson & Miliander 1991:128).

3. Methods

The main aim with this paper is to carry out a comparative study of the two main types of programs at upper-secondary school in Sweden to see if there are any differences in teaching and learning English in the obligatory A course\(^1\). The comparison includes, among other

\(^1\) All students in Secondary school have to attend this course. The students learn more about English when it comes to reading, writing, speaking and of course grammar.
things: material and tasks, how the students work, and the environment in the classrooms and
its effects. The study is based on classroom observations in English A courses in practical and
theoretical programs at three different schools and with eight different teachers. The purpose
was to find out if the two kinds of students had different opportunities to learn English. It was
also my intention to see if the students’ previous grades mattered when they started upper-
secondary school.

3.1 The schools and the students

The three schools involved in this study do not have any connection with each other as they
are situated over 50 km from one another. All of them have practical and theoretical
programs. The schools are situated in small towns or villages and have between 300 and 900
students each. Eleven classes were observed, five of them theoretical and six practical. A
larger number of classes would have been preferable, but due to the fact that the national tests
in both the A course and the B course in English were held at the time I did my study, many
lessons were cancelled. After the national tests, the teachers had time off to correct the tests
and even more lessons were cancelled, or the students got homework so that they did not have
to attend class.

As for the differences between the schools, one of them had grouped the students according to
performance level. The technical programs and the other practical programs had three levels:
slow, medium and fast, and the theoretical programs had four levels: slow, medium, fast and
very fast. The other two schools did not group the students. There were also differences
between the schools when it came to the length of the lessons. In one of the schools the length
of an English lesson was 40 minutes whereas at the other schools it was 60 and 80 minutes
long respectively. The A course was also planned differently: in two of the schools the A
course was spread over two years whereas at the school with the grouped students it lasted
one year plus another eleven weeks if necessary. The students there also had the option to
study the B course, which is not obligatory. Otherwise the schools were quite alike; they all
had small group rooms and computer rooms for the students to work in.

3.2 The study

After having decided which classes to observe I collected the students’ grades from lower-
secondary school. These are public information in Sweden and everyone has the right to ask
for them. I wanted to see the students’ previous grades in order to compare them to the studies
made by Reuterberg & Svensson. But since I also wanted to find out if there were any differences between the two types of programs with respect to learning and teaching in the classroom, first-hand observations were required. To begin with, I wrote a plan on what to consider when observing the classes and after each lesson I asked the teachers if the students normally work with the same tasks, if they plan their own work and what material they work with (see appendix).

One of my observations concerned the noise in the classrooms and when I measured it I looked at what kinds of noises that occurred in the classrooms and I gave them different points. For example, a whisper received lower points than talking in normal tone when not supposed to (cf appendix). After the lessons I counted the points and when I had observed all of them I added the points up and divided them by the number of lessons I had observed. I then got a value for how noisy the lessons had been. The scale started on 1, as there was not a class that did not make any sounds at all, and the highest point that a class could get was 4.

3.3 Delimitations

My original idea was to give 20 teachers who work, or have worked, with both practical and theoretical students a questionnaire in addition to carrying out the classroom observations. My aim was to ask them if they had experienced any differences between teaching in practical and theoretical programs. However, this idea was later abandoned as the teachers were so stressed that they did not have the time to sit down and answer my questions. I therefore limited my study to classroom observations and the students’ average grades from lower-secondary school. I did not include any information on the students’ background in terms of social class as Båsjö & Svensson (1999:4) mentioned in their study that the students’ background is not visible in the classes.

4. Results and analysis

In my study I put together the five English A lessons attended by theoretical students and compared them to the six English A lessons where the students were enrolled in practical programs. I compared and contrasted the lessons despite the differences between the schools mentioned earlier, and even though these differences are sometimes more pronounced than between the classes in the different programs. As mentioned the lessons also lasted for different amounts of time in the schools, and one school had grouped the students. In the
following sections, I will include examples of how the students and teachers behaved towards, and spoke with, each other during the lessons.

4.1 Previous grades

Båsjö & Svensson (1999:4f) showed in their study that the students in practical programs did not have as good average grades from lower-secondary school as the students had in theoretical programs (see 2.2.1), and I first of all wanted to know if this was also the case in the classes in my study. I therefore collected some evidence to support the claim. Much to my surprise the differences between the grades were not as great in my study as they had been in the one by Båsjö & Svensson. The average grade from elementary school in programs with vocational training was 176p whereas it was 192p in the theoretical programs. There was only a difference of 16p, which means that theoretical students had, on average, better grades in up to three subjects\(^2\). Part of the explanation for this result is the differences between the specialisations within the programs. Social sciences and humanities had a very low average in one school while the natural sciences had a very high one. In the practical programs there were some specialisations, like construction work or trade and administration, which had become very popular and raised the average for this type of program. In fact, it was more difficult for students to get into some of these specialisations than into social sciences and humanities.

4.2 Classroom observations

4.2.1 Number of students in the classes and their gender

The number of students can be crucial when it comes to how much help they get from the teacher and how noisy the classrooms are. In my observations I considered the number of persons that actually attended the lesson and not the official number. By doing so I think I got a more realistic impression of the lesson as there are often people missing or sick. As it turned out, there was not one lesson where the whole class was present.

There were actually significant differences when it comes to the number of persons in the classroom and there was also a large contrast between the programs with respect to gender. On average there were 17.2 students in the classrooms in the theoretical classes and only 13.8 students in the practical. The students who attend a practical program should therefore have a

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\(^2\) The grading system has changed since the earlier studies. If the systems are compared a 10 is like the former 3, 15 like the former 4 and 20 like the former 5. Today one adds these numbers up. 176p \(\approx\) 3.2, 192 \(\approx\) 3.4.
chance to get more help from the teacher and presumably also a quieter classroom. Moreover, in one of the largest practical English courses (18 students) an assistant was present and helped a group of students in their work. So when it comes to the number of students and help from the teacher, the students attending a practical program have some advantage if compared to the theoretical students.

As mentioned above, there was also a gender difference between the programs. On average there were 9.2 girls and 8 boys in a theoretical course, i.e. the number of boys and girls was fairly equal in the classes. However, the numbers could be somewhat skewed due to the fact that I went to more classes within the social sciences and humanities specialisation than within the natural science specialisation. I observed two lessons where both types of specialisations were present, two social science classes and one natural science class. In the two mixed classes, and in one within the social specialisation, the number of persons of each gender was rather similar. But in one of the social science classes there were many more girls than boys and in the natural science class there was only one girl and ten boys. Below, Figure 3 shows the distribution of boys and girls within the five theoretical lessons I attended.

![Figure 3. Distribution of gender in the English lessons with theoretical students.](image)

In the practical programs there were on average 8.5 boys in a class and 5.3 girls. But these numbers are very misleading as within these programs boys and girls are in fact split up (see section 2.2). Among the classes I attended there was only one that had an even distribution of students, and they were only seven persons. In two of the classes there were fourteen boys in each and not a single girl, and in another class there were 16 girls and only two boys. These constellations might have had an affect on the noise in the classroom, which is the topic of the next section. Below, Figure 4 shows the distribution of boys and girls within the six practical lessons I attended.
4.2.2 Noise

Prior to the investigation I had thought that the practical programs would have a higher noise level than the theoretical ones. But much to my surprise they did not. The low number of students in the classes had an effect on the noise level and these classes had an average of 2 on the scale from 1 to 4. The theoretical programs had an average of 2.8. The difference may seem small, but it is still worth noting. The English courses in the practical programs were actually better for students who like a less noisy environment.

The kinds of noises should also be mentioned. The girls often whispered, and they did so for a very long time, up to several minutes, whereas boys more often spoke in a normal tone but only a couple of sentences at a time; then they sat quiet for a while and continued working with their assignment. Boys could also slap each others’ arms or throw elastics or rubbers at each other. This kind of behaviour did not make a lot of noise but could disturb the concentration of people sitting nearby as they saw what was happening. There were also more boys than girls who only sat without saying a word when they were finished with their tasks. Girls often started to speak with someone nearby or started to work with a new task. This meant that in a class with a lot of boys the noise level was very up and down. It could be very quiet for some time and one could almost hear the students breathing, but then suddenly something disturbed the silence and lasted for a short while, and after that it got completely quiet again. In a class with a lot of girls the sounds were a bit different. There was always a murmur of whispering voices, but the noise did not escalate. The effect of these two types of noise was that some periods of time it was easier to concentrate in the boys’ classrooms as it was really quiet, but the students could suddenly be disturbed by a slap or a voice talking in a normal tone. In the girls’ classrooms the students could find it difficult to get started with their
tasks, but a positive effect was that when the students had adapted to the level of noise it did not change, and the students could continue concentrating on what they were working with.

I also intended to estimate how much the students were up walking in the classes considering that this too is a kind of disturbance. But it was difficult to measure since the lessons lasted for such different periods of time. Finally I counted how many times the students moved within the classroom the first 40 minutes. There was not much difference when it came to the number of walks in the classroom. The students in the theoretical classes had an insignificantly higher average than in the practical courses; 2.2 versus 2.1. But the reasons why the students moved differed between the programs. In the practical classes the students more often took a walk to talk to a friend or throw something away in the wastebasket whereas in the theoretical classrooms the students mostly rose to fetch a dictionary. However, these movements did not seem to disturb the other students very much.

4.2.3 Teacher talk
There was a small difference in the amount of how much the teachers and the students spoke in the classes but this was individual and there was no visible pattern that distinguished the courses in the programs. However, a notable difference concerned the language that the teacher used when speaking to the students. Three out of five theoretical lessons were held in English. In the other two the teacher conducted the lesson in English but sometimes switched to Swedish when the students spoke of subjects that did not relate to the tasks they were working with. In the practical courses the teacher spoke Swedish in half of the lessons observed. Two lessons were given only in English and one in both Swedish and English. This suggests that theoretical students are likely to hear more English in school. It can of course be discussed whether it is good or bad to only speak English to the students, but I will not discuss it here. It may be interesting to note that I observed one grammar lesson in the practical courses and none in the theoretical ones, which could have influenced the results as grammar lessons are normally held in Swedish.

4.2.4 Student talk
The teacher is not the only person speaking in a classroom; in fact it is the students who speak the most. They do not only speak to the teacher but also with each other. In this respect there were differences between the programs. In all of the theoretical English classes that I observed the students spoke to the teacher in both English and Swedish. In the practical
programs the students in three out of six classes spoke in both languages and in the other three
the students only spoke Swedish to the teacher. When students speak to the teacher, the whole
class is often listening and it can be frightening for the students to speak in English, especially
if they believe themselves to be weak in the language. The results concerning students
speaking to their peers were the same. In all the theoretical classes one could hear the students
speak in both English and Swedish, though mostly Swedish. In the practical classes the
students only spoke Swedish in three out of six lessons. In the other three lessons both
languages were used.

I mentioned in section 2.6.2 that a student needs to feel that s/he belongs in a class (or a
group) and have enough self-esteem to be able to talk. This was confirmed when I observed a
group taking their national test in oral proficiency. There were four students and the test lasted
for 15 minutes. The person with the highest grade who had the most self-esteem became the
leader of the group. She talked for about seven minutes. The weakest student only talked for
ten seconds even though the first student tried to engage him in the discussion. As the only
boy and with lower grades than the others, he apparently did not feel he belonged in the
group.

It is difficult to say why there are more students in the theoretical programs that speak
English, but one reason could be that these students believe more in themselves and in their
knowledge of the language.

Another interesting result of this study was that the class where students spoke the most
English to their peers was actually a practical one. They had been in the same class for two
years and everyone spoke at least one sentence in English in the course of a word game.

**4.2.5 Placement in the classrooms**

One way to improve self-esteem is to let students work in groups without competition. It is
therefore important how the students sit in the classroom. In three out of five theoretical
courses, the students sat in pairs or alone. In four out of six practical lessons they sat in pairs,
in rows or alone. In the others the students sat in groups of three or four people. Most of the
students seemed to like sitting in pairs or rows and they were good workers when it came to
writing, reading and grammar. They always had someone to ask if they were unsure of what
to do. But in many cases when one of the students in a pair was finished with his/her task, the
other person lost concentration and worked less. In some cases the person who was finished was just waiting for the other to be done, and in a third scenario s/he turned around and started to speak with another pair of students. The students thus spoke a lot to each other. A difference when it came to how the students sat was that the students sitting in pairs or rows more often spoke Swedish to each other than the students sitting in groups and who were facing each other.

In two each of the theoretical and practical classes the students sat in groups of three or four people. In these classes the students worked as well as in the others when it came to reading, writing and grammar. I also saw a very good example where the teacher moved the pupils who were finished with their tasks into new groups and gave them other exercises while the persons who were not ready could keep concentrating on what they were working with. By doing so the students did not have to feel stressed by their partners if they wanted to work with an exercise that required at least two people. The classroom also got less noisy.

The difference between the types of placements was that in all classes where the students sat in groups of three or four the students spoke both English and Swedish to each other. It could thus be a reason for why a practical course had the highest number of utterances in English spoken by students. They had gained self-esteem by working in groups and felt secure in their environment as they had had to work with almost everyone in the class.

In my study, students in the theoretical programs still had a slight advantage when it comes to how people were sitting in the classroom, provided that groups are best, though the difference was not very big. It is difficult to tell as my study was so small.

4.2.6 Exercises

In all of the lessons the students were working with different tasks that were not distinctive to any program. But the reason for including the tasks in my study was to see if there were more integrative tasks than instrumental ones, especially when it comes to the practical programs. What I found was that in nine out of the eleven classes the students were working with tasks that could be both instrumental and integrative in nature. An example is the word game where the students were supposed to pick a card and explain what was on it so that the others in the group could guess what it was. This sort of game can be adapted to all kinds of learners depending on what is on the cards, and most importantly, the students seemed motivated to do
it. For example, it succeeded in making even the shyest boy speak in front of his peers and the teacher because he had something to talk about that interested him. The speaking test mentioned earlier is also suitable for both types of learners as the students had several subjects to choose from. However, it could be important to have the same types of learners in the same discussion group so that they all have something to say about the subject. Yet another example was tasks that could be done on the computer, and that were presented in different ways but still taught the students the same things, like vocabulary and grammar.

However, two of the lessons were completely for one type of integrative learners, namely those who wanted to be integrated within the second-language culture. These two lessons were about learning about other countries and cultures. In one of them the students had worked with a country of their own choice and the students now presented the countries in front of the class two and two. In the other, the students had had a visitor from an African country and they had to write a summary of what he had said about his life in Africa. The second lesson certainly interested some integrative learners in the class. Though, it is not evident that all students that want to be integrated in an English-speaking culture want to be integrated in an African one. Instrumental learners could fulfil such a task merely for the grade, but they will not be motivated by it. If integrative tasks are used too often in school, and not in balance with instrumental tasks, instrumental learners could lose their interest in learning a second language. One of these lessons was in a practical program and the other in a theoretical program. I did not observe a lesson where the students only worked with instrumental tasks. I cannot draw a conclusion as to whether the students work more with integrative tasks than instrumental ones by observing so few lessons. But from what I have seen so far, the students work slightly more with integrative assignments prescribed by the local curriculum. The students in theoretical classes seemed to have more motivation to learn as they used the dictionaries that were available in almost every classroom. The students in the practical programs did not take advantage of this possibility even where dictionaries were at hand.

4.3 Material

The material that the learners worked with was also of interest as it actually differed between the programs. Even though the schools have access to several books, the practical programs often used the same ones, namely Read and Catch up or Read and React. These textbooks are for weaker learners and were used in four out of six classes. In two of these classes both
books were used and the students could choose which one they would like to work with, or start with one of the books and then switch to the other when they felt ready. In the first case the students had to take some responsibility for their actions and their learning as they had to choose books by themselves. Their need of self-actualization was taken care of already at the beginning of the course. In the other four classes the teacher had chosen the book for the students. However this does not mean that the students did not get to know their learning progress as they still could be involved in the planning of the lessons and their own work. Often the students also had *Basic Grammar Check* or *Grammar Check* that they worked in from time to time. *Basic Grammar Check*, which has easier exercises, was used more often than *Grammar Check*. Three out of six classes used the former whereas two classes used the latter. In the sixth class neither of these books was used. Worth to mention is that both these workbooks are aimed at students in lower secondary school.

In the theoretical programs almost all courses used several books. *Read and React* was only used in one of the classes and *Read and Catch up* was not used at all. Instead, the theoretical students worked with more advanced books like *Progress Gold A* or *Masterplan*. The students also had the books *Grammar Check* and *Basic Grammar Check* to work with. The former was used in three and the latter in two classes. There were also differences with respect to the novels the students had to read according to the local curriculum. In all of the schools the students had to read one or two novels, but the degree of difficulty of the novels was not the same in the courses. The students in theoretical programs often had to read more difficult novels. That the theoretical students had to work with more advanced material means that these students were already from the beginning supposed to be more advanced learners than the students in practical programs, which in fact was not always the case in this study since some of the practical students actually had better grades from lower secondary-school than some of the theoretical students.

**4.4 Lesson planning**

In order to get a better impression of what the students were working with when I was not there I asked the teachers how they usually worked and planned their lessons. I mentioned earlier that some of the students could choose their textbook, themselves which can be considered a first step in taking responsibility for their own learning. The other students could learn how they progressed by choosing exercises and planning their own work. One should bear in mind that in one school the students had been divided into levels according to how
they scored on an English test they took in their first English lesson. This test measured the
students’ abilities. In these classes the students knew that everyone had almost the same
knowledge of the subject and could work accordingly. Many students in these classes wanted
to work with the same kinds of exercises and asked for very structured lessons.

There was not one theoretical class in which all the students worked with the same exercises
and the same material. In two of the classes the students worked mostly with the same tasks,
but sometimes they had a choice. In three of the classes, the teacher gave the students
suggestions for what to work with. There were some tasks that were obligatory and others that
could be chosen freely. Therefore, most of the theoretical classes had some element of learner
autonomy in them.

The students in the practical courses had come further in terms of choosing material, self-
actualization and motivation, but there was no uniform pattern. In two of the classes the
teachers found it difficult not to work close to the textbook. They used it to give structure to
the lessons and everyone had to work with the same tasks. In one of the six lessons the
students worked mostly with the same tasks decided by the teacher and in two classes the
students had more of a choice. In these last two classes the students had to do certain
exercises, but others were optional. However, the teacher felt that the students mostly did
what they had to do and did not bother to work with any of the optional exercises. They did
not take responsibility for their own learning even if the teacher gave them the chance. The
only class where the students worked with a choice of both materials and tasks was a practical
one. But even in that class the teacher had some lessons where everyone had to do the same
things, especially when the teacher explained grammar or the class was going to learn about a
new culture and host a visitor.

5. Discussion

After having finished my study I noticed that it did not turn out as I thought it would when I
had written the background sections. First of all, the grades between the practical students and
the theoretical students did not differ as much as they did in previous studies. Therefore the
students were on almost equal levels when they started upper-secondary school, but this was
difficult to confirm as several of my observations took place in classes with students that were
mixed according to their results on their first English test. These classes have a certain effect
on the students, which in turn had an influence on the results of my study. The students in the
mixed classes only compared themselves to their peers in the classroom. This meant that the students in the most advanced classes had very high demands on themselves and the students in the less advanced class were really happy if they managed to get a pass. When the less advanced students were sure of getting a pass they stopped working and were satisfied with what they had accomplished. Many of these students did not really want to learn but only pass the course, and I can understand the frustration among teachers trying to make the students understand why languages are important when the students do not see this at all.

Secondly, I think that motivation is important when it comes to exercises in school. An example of how motivation can affect learning is when teachers decide that their class has to establish contact with another school and make it compulsory for each student to communicate via Internet. Communicating via Internet is motivating for integrative learners and less motivating for instrumental learners. I think that having contact with native speakers through the Net is a good idea, but it should be optional. Another example when lack of motivation could be an important reason for students failing the teacher’s demands is in connection with learning about different cultures. Knowledge of English-speaking cultures is often a criterion for a passing grade. But students who find this topic uninteresting can lose the small interest they have in learning a new language. Yet again, the instrumental learners are at a disadvantage. These are two examples where it is important for the teacher to see all students as individuals and not as a group where all want the same thing. The English curriculum is often constructed in a way that benefits integrative learners, and instrumental learners can find it difficult to be motivated by these, usually compulsory, sorts of tasks. It is therefore important for teachers to take note of all suggestions arising during the course and perhaps have choices between working with integrative and instrumental tasks. It is, for example, not evident that all students in theoretical programs are integrative learners and all students in vocational training programs are instrumental learners. Classes are often a mix of these two types of learners. However, there are often more instrumental learners in a practical program, and this can be a reason why so many students fail their exams. They are not motivated as they have to do so many integrative tasks.

So far, I have not discussed the students that were not motivated to learn languages. Many of these students were in the less advanced classes. Unmotivated students exist in both types of programs and they can create problems for the teacher and slow the pace down for students who want to learn. Students in theoretical programs may therefore have a certain advantage as
these students have chosen to learn more about theoretical subjects, and languages belong to those. Students in practical programs have to study English even if they do not want to. This means that one is more likely to find motivated students in the theoretical courses.

The theoretical classes also had a small advantage when it comes to material and exercises. Students in practical programs were more often free to choose their course material, but they could only select from two easy books. The theoretical students did not have a choice of material, but the textbooks were often for advanced learners. Also, the teachers spoke more English to the students in the theoretical programs than to the students in the practical ones.

On the other hand, the students in the practical programs had some advantage when it comes to the number of students in the classroom and to getting help from the teachers. In the lessons where practical students attended there were on average 3.4 persons less than in the theoretical ones. The classrooms were also less noisy than those in the theoretical courses, which could be due to the lower number of students.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen there are differences between the English A courses in practical and theoretical programs at upper-secondary school. The differences concern the number of students in the class, the material, the opportunities to choose exercises and the level of noise in the classroom. These will affect the learners in different ways. But it cannot be claimed that one course is better than the other as the students start the courses with different aims and goals. The students do have comparable opportunities to learn and get a pass in the programs, but it is more difficult for students in practical programs to get higher grades since they do not have access to the same material as the theoretical students and they do not compete as much with their peers either. As for the question whether teachers are influenced by the common view that students in practical programs work less than students in theoretical programs I can only say that teachers cannot be judged as a group. In my study there were teachers who taught their students in the same way regardless of whether they studied in practical or theoretical programs. Other teachers were influenced by the fact that many students were unmotivated in practical courses and adapted the pace to them.

One suggestion for further studies is to make a comparative study of different schools and see if there are any differences in the A courses there and if they have any effect on the students’
learning. When I did my study I sometimes saw more contrasts between the schools than between the courses. There were e.g. differences when it came to the length of the lessons and the period of time the A course endured, in one school it was put on one year and in the others on two. Another question is how much the students put in groups according to how they score on their first English test are affected by this. A third one could be how the teachers affect each other and their teaching methods.
List of references


This is the form I put together and used in each of my classroom observations.

Appendix: Classroom observations.

Number of students in the class:
Boys:
Girls:

Noise
Students whispering: 1
Whispering for a long time: 2
Students talking in a normal tone: 2
Talking for a long time: 3
Screaming or other loud noises: 4

The teacher speaks
English
Swedish
Both

The students speak to the teacher
English
Swedish
Both

The students speak to each other
English
Swedish
Both

Placements in the classrooms
Students sit alone
Students sit in pairs
Students sit in groups
Students sit in rows

**Exercises**
Instrumental
Integrative

**Material**
What sorts of books do they use
Novels
Other things

**Lesson planning**
The students can influence their learning
The students cannot influence their learning

**Other remarks**