

BTG PAPER for presentation at NERA 2015 in Gothenburg

Differences in English teachers' approaches to pupils' out-of-school English encounters in relation to school and pupil demographic factors

## Abstract

The purpose of this questionnaire-based study is to investigate whether differences in ways in which teachers of English view the challenge of generating pupil motivation, and the nature and qualities of the activities they regard as motivational, are related to (i) school-type and (ii) pupil demographics. The study is part of a larger project investigating ways in which teachers relate to pupils' increasing encounters with English in out-of-school contexts as observed recently in the Nordic countries (Simensen, 2010; Sundqvist, 2009). The study draws on responses of teachers ( $n = 111$ ) who completed an online survey sent in 2014 to a randomly-drawn sample of grade 6 – 9 English teachers ( $N = 250$ ). The questionnaire comprised Likert-scale items focusing on factors identified as having a positive impact on language learning motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Henry, 2013). These were: (i) self-reported recognition of the value of youth culture in goal-directed teaching, (ii) knowledge and use of digital medias, (iii) creation of networked environments, (iv) creation of activities emphasizing creativity and self-expression, and (v) attempts to link out-of-school English experiences with in-school learning. The questionnaire additionally included an open-ended question inviting teachers to describe a task they found particularly motivated their pupils. Mean scores were calculated for the scales and cluster analysis was used to identify teachers with differing approaches to generating motivation. Responses to the open question were content analyzed and quantitatively coded. Preliminary analyses indicate that teachers who report types of practice that draw on pupils' out-of-school encounters with English, create learning activities that engage with pupils' interests and identities and which embody features of networked communication are overrepresented in (i) independent schools and (ii) schools with relatively high proportions of pupils from academic home backgrounds and a low share of pupils with minority backgrounds. In that performance is mediated by motivation (Dörnyei, 2009), the presence of such patterns sheds light on school- and pupil-related differences in attainment found in Nordic and other settings.

## Introduction

The larger project, of which the current questionnaire-based study is part, is called *Bridging the gap between in- and out of school English – Learning from good practice*<sup>1</sup>, hence-forth BTG. The aims, theoretical framework and design of this over-arching project will be outlined in the below section.

Purpose and theoretical framing of the project Bridging the Gap between in- and out of school English

The aim of BTG is to find out how the observed gap between Swedish students' use of English in their free-time and in school (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2011), can be constructively addressed and bridged in the classroom by the teacher. Identifying good practice in this field is critical, since the notion that the English learnt in school is neither connected nor relevant to situations where students use English outside school has been found to be detrimental to students' motivation for learning English in school. Moreover, the problem is increasing in Sweden as well as in other countries (Henry, 2013; Ushioda, 2013).

In a review of L2 literature, we identified the following qualities in English instruction as beneficial for students' motivation:

- teachers' knowledge and recognition of youth culture;
- the linking of students' cultural and linguistic experiences to curricular goals;
- the emphasis on creativity and self-expression;
- learning activities encouraging collaboration, and rewarding collective knowledge;
- the use of "them-relevant" texts, such as digital texts

(Moje & Hinchman, 2004; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gee, 2005; Sundqvist, 2009; Thorne and Reinhardt, 2008).

Thus we aim to investigate classrooms of teachers whose instruction is in line with the above, and which are perceived by students as motivating as well as providing "affinity space", and offering ample opportunities for creativity, self-expression and collaborative learning. The analytical framework of the project includes theories about motivation and responsive teaching in regard to L2 learning and -teaching, as well as the notions of implicit theories about "intelligence" and of "mind-sets" (Dweck, 2000 and 2006; Ryan & Mercer, 2011).

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The over-arching aim of the project is to generate knowledge which might help L2 teachers to bridge the gap between in and out-of-school English, in order to maximize students' motivation and learning in language classrooms.

## The questionnaire study

The current paper, as mentioned, is based on a questionnaire study. In regard to BTG, the primary function of the questionnaire is to target teachers in whose classrooms we can expect to find the sort of motivating and "gap-bridging" activities that are in focus of the BTG project, and which in the next step will be explored in ethnographic classroom studies. The urge to explore and learn from such "good practice" is motivated by

- 1) the situation that students' motivation for learning English in school has decreased in Sweden as well as other countries in recent years, due to the fact that many students feel that their major learning of English takes place out of school, e.g. when they are playing computer-games and consuming popular culture. English in school neither feel as relevant in relation to their personal interests and identities, nor to their interpretations of what linguistic competencies are important in their lives and in the society (the Swedish School Inspectorate, 2011).
- 2) evidence from motivational research on L2 acquisition, that instruction which students perceive as meaningful in regard to personal interests, as creative, and authentic, and which allow students to cooperate, promotes their inner motivation for L2 learning.

Thus, if this kind of qualities were increased in L2 instruction, and if the funds of knowledge that students develop in their free-time were drawn upon in class and related to curricular goals (i.e. if teachers manage to bridge the gap between in- and out of school English), this would assumedly have a positive impact on students' motivation for L2 learning, and thus on L2 instruction to provide to students' proficiency in English in more profound ways. However, we see this potential to enhance students' motivation for and exchange from L2 instruction as beneficial, not only for the development of students' linguistic skills, their opportunities generally to develop agency and sense of personal meaning in school. This is an important motive for exploring classroom activities which evoke students' inner motivation through connecting to their worlds outside school, and to learn from them. Since inner motivation has a strong correlation with effort and results, we could also expect that changes along these lines to positively effect students' achievements. Especially schools with low results in English could gain much if this potential is tapped.

## Purpose and aims

Schools which mainly serve socially advantaged groups of students (with academic and majority culture backgrounds) tend to have higher average grades as well as a larger proportion of qualified teachers<sup>2</sup>. An uneven distribution of teachers with the sort of skills, attitudes and practice that promote motivation and deep learning in L2 classrooms could be part of the explanation to observed grade differences between schools serving different student populations in regard to educational and ethnic or linguistic background.

Promoting highly motivational and “gap-bridging” skills, attitudes and practices in the L2 classrooms of schools which mainly serve students with minority background and with low educational background, might on the other hand give students more equal opportunities to high quality education and associated provisions in terms of motivation, agency and grades. Thus, changing the cultural production in these classrooms, through making more extensive and systematic use of these students’ motivation and free-time English experiences, might to some degree interrupt processes of social reproduction.

The purpose of this study within BTG, is to find out whether English teachers and classrooms (in school year 6-9), that are characterized by

- 1) a high awareness of youth culture and of the sort of English-mediated activities and contexts in which students engage in their free time, and
  - 2) a deliberate use of students’ out of school English knowledge and inner motivation as resources for learning in regard to curricular goals,
- are more likely to be found in certain types of schools or in schools in demographically similar areas.

## Method

### Sample

The study draws on responses of teachers (n = 111) who completed an online survey sent in 2014 to a sample of grade 6 – 9 English teachers (N =250). The sampling was made in three steps: 25 municipalities in Western Sweden were selected and grouped according to their demography (based on the codes ascribed to Swedish municipalities by SCB (Statistics Sweden): (i) Major city; (ii) Suburb of major city; (iii) Large Town with minor satellite municipalities; and (iv) Rural and Mill

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<sup>2</sup> Ref PISA och SIRIS, samt: These correlations were also true for the schools in the sample of the current study.

towns. This was to grant the participation of teachers from schools in a wide range of social, economic and cultural contexts and serving a wide variety of students. Half of the schools (including independent schools<sup>3</sup>) in each municipality were selected (every second school on an alphabetical list). All English teachers in the selected schools were invited through a personal letter and an email to participate in the online questionnaire study. After three reminders, 40 % of the teachers had answered. In all, 110 teachers from 53 schools were included in the study. The proportion of schools from different municipalities were: major city (N=21), suburb of major city (N=8), Large town (N=15) and rural and mill towns (N=9). The proportion of different school types were: public schools (N=43) and independent schools (N=10).

## Variables

### *Dependent variables*

The questionnaire comprised Likert-scale items focusing on factors identified as having a positive impact on language learning motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Henry, 2013). These were: (i) self-reported recognition of the value of youth culture in goal-directed teaching, (ii) knowledge and use of digital medias, (iii) creation of networked environments, (iv) creation of activities emphasizing creativity and self-expression, and (v) attempts to link out-of-school English experiences with in-school learning. For the purpose of the current study, we used items related to two scales, *Awareness scale* and *Gap Bridging scale*.

The awareness scale included the following items:

- I feel I know the different forms of English my students meet outside school
- I think I know what my students are doing when they are using English outside school.
- I am interested in how my students use English outside school.
- I sometimes talk with my students about how they use English outside school.

Cronbach's alpha 76.

The Gap Bridging scale included the following items:

- I give the students rich opportunities of using the English they have learned outside school when they are working in the classroom.
- It is important to me to do many connections between English in and outside school.
- I try to take in as much as possible of the English from the world outside school in my teaching.
- I often encourage students to bring texts they themselves find interesting and use them in class.

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<sup>3</sup> An independent school in Sweden is funded by public means, open to all students, free of charge (public funding), and following the national curriculum and school law, but has a private management.

Cronbach's alpha .72

The questionnaire additionally included an open-ended question inviting teachers to describe a task which they found particularly motivating for their pupils.

The answers to the open question were evaluated in regard to criteria for awareness and Gap-bridging qualities, and scored 0-2 (0 = not meeting any of the criteria; 2 = meeting several criteria). Mean scores were calculated for the scales and the scores respectively. These were analyzed in SPSS in relation to (1) school demographical variables (sort of municipality; proportion of students with foreign background and with academic background), (2) school authority (municipal or free school), (3) the school's average grades, and (3) the rate of qualified teachers in the school.

#### *Independent variables*

For independent variables we used

- School grade point average (school year 9)
- Rate of students with academic background (%)
- Rate of students with foreign background (%)
- Principal authority (municipal/independent schools)

Academic background refers to students with at least one parent with 3 or more years of higher education. Foreign background refers to students who are born abroad or whose both parents are born abroad (National Agency of Education, 2004).

#### *Method of analysis*

In order to identify groups of teachers who distinctly differed with respect to Awareness and Gap Bridging practices a non-hierarchical cluster analysis was carried out. Since cluster analysis is an explorative technique different models were tested.

When analyzing the relations between teachers' gap bridging practices, awareness and response to the open-ended question and independent variables (see above), independent samples t-test and correlational analysis were used.

#### *Results*

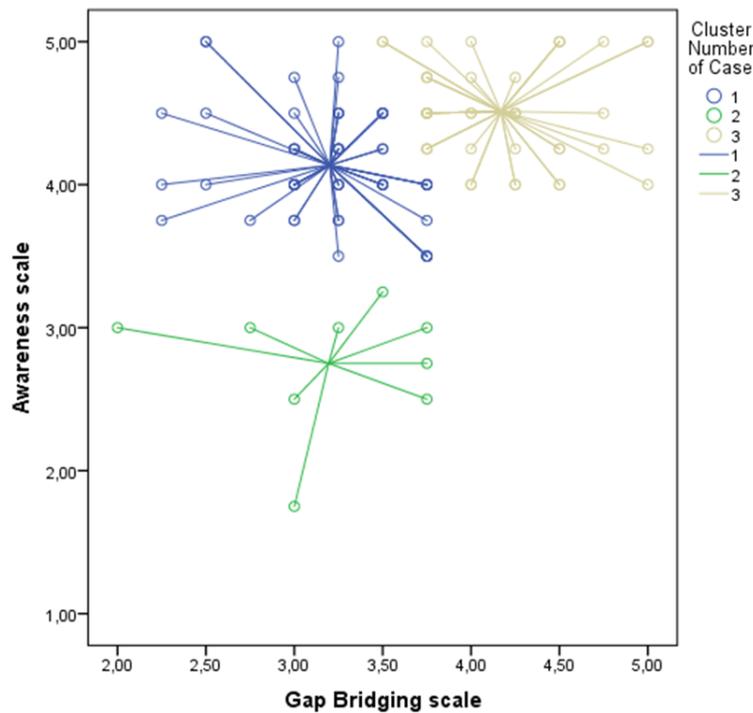
##### *Non-hierarchical cluster analysis*

In a first step a non-hierarchical cluster analysis was performed in order to identify groupings of individuals which differed with respect to Awareness and Gap Bridging practices. The model providing the clearest grouping of individuals was a three-cluster model (Figure 1). Three main

clusters emerged where cluster 3 distinctly differs from the other two in high scores on both the Awareness and Gap Bridging scale.

Figure 1.

Cluster analysis with three clusters



There was a small tendency that the teachers in the highest cluster (of three) worked in independent schools, and in schools with higher grades, a higher proportion of students with academic background and a lower proportion of students with foreign background.

T-test...

#### Correlational analysis

In order to investigate if there are relations between teachers' gap bridging practices and school demographic variables, bivariate correlations were performed. There were significant correlations between different school demographic variables as expected. However, the correlations between teachers' scores and school demographic variables (school's rate of students' academic and foreign background, and school grade point average), were non-significant. The only significant correlation found was between the Gap Bridging scale and school type, to the advantage of independent schools

Table 3

*Correlations between variables in the study*

	School-grade	Foreign	Parented	Open	Awareness	Gapbridge
School type	.49**	-.24	.41**	.06	-.02	.29*
School-grade		-.67**	.84**	.13	.20	.19
Foreign			-.60**	-.24	-.03	-.12
Parented				.19	.03	.15
Open					-.06	-.10
Awareness						.31*

\*\* significant at the 0.01 level \* significant at the 0.05 level

Hence, our results suggest that English teachers who represent the kind of attitudes and practice that are in line with BTG and the motivational theories concerning L2 learning that the project rests on, are as frequent in schools that recruit students from predominantly academic or non-academic backgrounds; in culturally and linguistically diverse and homogenous schools, in schools located in different types of municipalities (e.g. rural municipalities or major cities), and in schools with high and low grade average. However, a significant (but small) correlation was found between *The Gap bridging scale* and principal authority, where teachers on independent schools tended to score higher than those in municipal schools.

Since our sampling strategy included steps to ensure demographic variation on school level, and random sampling of individuals, and since the response rate was 40 %, we could not rule out that the seeming absence of correlations was an effect of the sample. It could be assumed that the teachers who chose to participate share a special interest in English didactics. In other words, should all teachers in all the selected schools have completed the survey, we might have been able to observe patterns in the teachers' responses according to school characteristics (student

demography; local community; principal authority; average grades). If so, existing patterns could be masked due to a biased sample.

To test the probability that missing schools (schools where no teachers responded) would bias the result, we compared the missing schools to the rest of the sample and found no systematic differences with respect to student demography, results or municipality group. Also, the within-school variation was considerable in most schools (which indicates that there was no bias in that mainly the high-scoring teachers in each school responded).

The response rate varied between schools, and schools with relatively higher results and proportion of students with academic background, and with a relatively lower proportion of students with foreign background tended to be among those with a low response rate. However, there was no systematic difference in means between schools with high and low response rates.

The above analyzes of missing cases suggest that the unexpectedly even distribution between different kinds of schools, of teachers that advocate certain qualities in L2 instruction which we are looking for, indicates something real and is not primarily a product of a biased sample due to that the 40 % of the invited teachers, who participated share a special interest in English didactics.

## Dicussion

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BTG+L2 motivation är speciella aspekter av lärarkompetens, typ elevtillvända lärare. Kanske hade det sett annorlunda ut om vi hade haft med flera dimensioner av lärarskicklighet, och att det är just de elevtillvända lärarna som är väl utspridda.

<i>Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Missing %</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>
<b>Teachers</b>				
Gapbridge	108	1.8	3.59	0.65
Awareness	109	0.9	4.16	0.59
Open	93	15.5	3.18	1.58
<b>School</b>				
Parented	49	7.5	46.29	17.13
Foreign	50	5.7	27.80	29.42
Grade_school	53		206.51	24.33