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English for Young Learners in Sweden: Activities, materials and language use in the classroom

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Abstract

Like almost everywhere else, the role and the status of the English language have been increasing in Swedish society, including the education system. All students in Swedish schools receive some more or less formal instruction in the English subject by the time they are in third grade, though very many are exposed to the language even earlier, both at school and outside of it. Despite these circumstances, we seem to know very little about the realities of English for young learners (EYL) instruction at Swedish primary schools, e.g. regarding the following aspects: What activities do the teachers organize in their English classes? What materials do they work with and how? In what ways and to what extent do they use the target language, English?

The present contribution reports on the results of two small studies addressing precisely these issues, among others. The first study is based on a number of actual observations and recordings of EYL lessons from preschool class to grade 3, followed by interviews with the respective teachers; the second is based on a questionnaire with a broader range of primary school teachers.

The results suggest that some commonly promoted recommendations in the literature regarding EYL are not generally followed by many EYL teachers in Sweden. For example, when it comes to the use of English vs. Swedish in the English classroom, the share and quality of the target-language input, not least from the teachers themselves, might well be enhanced. In addition – and this aspect is related to the previous one – EYL instruction and its efficiency could be expected to benefit from contextualizing the classroom activities and communication to a greater extent, e.g. by using children's literature of various kinds and engaging in meaningful interaction about it.

Keywords

English for Young Learners, English as a Foreign Language, classroom interaction, target language use, activities, materials, children's literature, contextualized language teaching, primary school, Sweden.

1. Introduction

The role of the English language as the world's foremost medium of international communication continues to grow, and its position is becoming ever stronger as the most popular foreign language studied and learned in Sweden and almost everywhere else where it does not already enjoy the

status of a first or second language (Melchers & Shaw 2011 p. 216ff). While certain countries and regions outside of the traditionally English-speaking world may be in the process of increasing their political, economic, military and/or cultural impact – and in its wake the interest that outsiders might have in the languages associated with those geographical and political entities (courses in Chinese, anyone?) – English seems destined to remain, at least in the foreseeable future, "the language of choice" (Coulmas 2013 p. 244) among both policy makers and individuals aiming to get the maximum return (i.e. opportunities) on their investment (i.e. study time and effort).

This certainly applies to Sweden, where English is still generally considered one out of three so-called 'core subjects' in primary and secondary school (together with mathematics and the country's official 'main language' Swedish), since a passing grade in these three subjects in grade 9 used to be a precondition for being allowed to continue one's studies at the upper-secondary level. In Sweden, English also tends to be one of the most highly regarded and popular school subjects among students, according to the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2004 p. 51), and Swedes are, statistically speaking, among the most proficient non-native speakers of English in Europe and beyond, according to a recent report by EF, a company offering international language courses for youths (EF 2015). Whether it is a consequence of or a precondition for this high level of proficiency (probably both), English is, furthermore, ubiquitous in the Swedish media as well as many businesses and other organizations, and it is used by a large share of the population, especially the younger segment, on a regular basis even during spare time (e.g. Sundqvist 2009 p. 116ff).

By contrast, and disregarding the more complex case of immigrant communities in the present context, the share of people in Sweden having advanced communicative competence in *another* foreign language (after English) is among the lowest in Europe (European Commission 2012 p. 5). Presumably, this is partly due to a perceived lack of incentive and much fewer natural opportunities to encounter and practice those languages.[1]

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[1] While this circumstance is deplorable in any context, it seems particularly so in a *festschrift* in honour of a revered professor of *German* literature. Unfortunately, and even though we can detect signs that the importance of proficiency in languages other than Swedish and English is acknowledged in some quarters in Sweden, notably the business sector, and not least when it comes to German, enrolment numbers and learning outcomes of many language courses on the secondary and tertiary levels leave much to be desired. Ironically, without us wishing to do this, but in line with the developments described, our focusing on English for young learners in Sweden – and our following global trends by doing so *in* English to boot – may contribute to the increasing influence of this language and the concomitant weakening of the rest.

As a corollary of the increasing spread and status of English in the "expanding circle" (Kachru 1985/2005), i.e. in all the countries where English is on the increase but not a first or official language, it has become more and more common to provide children with instruction in the language at an ever younger age. Once again, Sweden is no exception, and while Swedish primary schools are required to start giving formal English lessons by grade 3 at the latest (i.e. when the children are around ten years old), it has become common for them to do so already in grades 1 or 2 (see e.g. Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2012 p. 25; cf. also 2.1 below). However, despite the fact that the contents, methods and overall quality of teaching and learning ought to be a prime concern in any subject and at any level, including education-focused research, we seem to know rather little of the realities when it comes to English for Young Learners (EYL) instruction in Sweden. The present contribution is intended to help fill this gap, albeit in a tentative manner and with quantitatively limited data derived from two small studies.

1.1 Context of the studies

A word may be in order about the circumstances under which we conducted the investigations reported on here. They were originally intended as preparatory studies for a much larger project on EYL in Sweden, a project still waiting to be realized at the moment of writing. This project was designed to comprise three major stages:

1) gaining an overview of the teaching practices employed in a sizeable number of EYL classrooms in Sweden, as well as the teachers' opinions about conditions, challenges and solutions in this context;

2) the identification and discussion of best practices among the teachers and classes involved in stage 1, especially with respect to classroom communication, language use and contextualized (in particular literature-based) teaching and learning;

3) the promotion of these best practices with the help of research circles.

The original purpose of the investigations to be presented here – one carried out in the autumn 2012 and one in the spring 2015 – was a) to establish contacts with a number of potential informants for the larger project, b) to gain a first idea of what we could expect to find in a more extensive data collection process corresponding to stage 1 in that project (and perhaps allow us to fine-tune our research aims on the basis of those insights), and c) to test some methods for the collection of relevant data, namely classroom recordings, interviews with teachers, and questionnaires. In other words, the studies were conducted as test rounds and not necessarily with a view to subsequent publication, but they actually did yield

a range of interesting results that we consider worth sharing, especially in view of the current dearth of data on EYL classroom practices in Sweden.

1.2 Structure of the present report

Regarding the structure of the rest of this contribution, section 2 will provide the background to our investigations, in particular some pertinent if limited information about a) the Swedish school system, especially the role and preconditions of EYL within it, b) previous studies on the language(s) of instruction in second or foreign language (L2) classrooms, and c) research on contextualized L2 teaching and learning, with a focus on children's literature in an EYL context. The two sections following these overviews, i.e. sections 3 and 4, will each be dedicated to one of our two studies, with a description of the respective methods used and the type of data collected, followed by a presentation and discussion of the results. A more general discussion and conclusion in section 5 will round this contribution off.

2. Background and previous research

2.1 EYL in the Swedish school system

Compulsory education in Sweden comprises grades 1-9, though in actual practice, the large majority of children and adolescents spend many more years in the Swedish education system than that, both because they are likely to attend a preschool, usually from as early as one year of age, and because they are at least equally likely to go on to the upper-secondary level (grades 10-12).

Between preschool proper and primary grade 1, there is an intermediate year called, since 1998, *förskoleklass* in Swedish and *preschool class* in English. Typically integrated with a primary school, this class or grade is intended to ease the children's transition between the school forms. Preschool class and grades 1-3 are frequently subsumed under the common abbreviation *F-3*, which will also be used in the present report. Among other things, it reflects the fact that a teaching degree at that level will cover exactly those four grades and not just grades 1-3, for example.

When it comes to English in Swedish compulsory education, schools are required to offer a minimum of 480 hours of English instruction *in total* for grades 1-9 (Skolverket, n.d.). They are also required to start with English in grade 3 at the latest, though how they distribute the hours over the years, and whether to start already in grades 1 or 2 (thereby potentially leaving fewer hours for the later grades) is up to each school to decide – or to the municipality making the decision for all its schools.

With regard to intended learning outcomes and assessment for English in grades 1-3 specifically, the official Swedish *Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class and the Recreation Centre 2011*, to give its full English

name (Skolverket 2011), has nothing to say. When it comes to the so-called "core content" of the subject, however, it provides the following list for "years 1-3":

Content of communication
- Subject areas that are familiar to the pupils.
- Interests, people and places.
- Daily life and ways of living in different contexts and areas where English is used.

Listening and reading – reception
- Clearly spoken English and texts from various media.
- Simple instructions and descriptions.
- Different types of simple conversations and dialogues.
- Films and dramatised narratives for children.
- Songs, rhymes, poems and sagas.
- Words and phrases in their local surroundings, such as those used on signs and other simple texts.

Speaking, writing and discussing – production and interaction
- Simple presentations.
- Simple descriptions and messages.
- Songs, rhymes and dramatisations.
  (Skolverket 2011 p. 33)

The Curriculum puts strong emphasis on *communication* in the English subject, as illustrated by the following paragraph from the "aims" of the subject for compulsory school as a whole:

> Through teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop all-round communicative skills. These skills involve understanding spoken and written English, being able to formulate one's thinking and interact with others in the spoken and written language, and the ability to adapt use of language to different situations, purposes and recipients. Communication skills also cover confidence in using the language and the ability to use different strategies to support communication and solve problems when language skills by themselves are not sufficient. (Skolverket 2011 p. 32)

Yet how are these aims best achieved? According to recent research, second language acquisition is in many respects similar to first language acquisition, and educators ought to draw practical conclusions from this. For example, learners of both first and second languages (L1s and L2s) benefit from contextualized language use, from developing listening before speaking,

and from naturally occurring repetition (Hadaway, Vardell & Young 2002). It is also generally recommended that second-language learning should start as early as possible (cf. Pinter 2006).

As argued by Lundahl (2014), the Swedish National Curriculum is largely influenced by both constructivist and social constructivist theory, in the sense that it combines a "focus both on cognition in the form of lower-level and higher-order thinking […] and on the social nature of learning" (p. 23). In the theoretical background sections that follow below, we have considered studies based on both theories, though we have organized the information not according to theoretical foundation but with regard to two aspects we consider significant for EYL instruction: the language(s) used for communicating in the English classroom, and the types of tasks, activities and materials employed.

2.2 The medium of instruction in the language classroom

The effect of the language of instruction on L2 learning and on L2 students' engagement in learning tasks has received a great deal of attention in the research literature (e.g. Creese & Blackledge 2010; Hélot & Ó Laoire 2011; Levine 2011; Hall & Cook 2012; Hornberger & Link 2012; Velasco & García 2014; Kharkhurin & Wei 2015). Lundahl (2014) points out that "[l]earners will not develop the target language unless they get many opportunities to use it" (p. 40), and there is a general consensus on the importance of exposure to the L2, and consequently on the benefits of using the target language as the base language in the classroom, simply to provide more L2 input (cf. e.g. Nikolov and Curtain 2000 and Pinter 2006). However, there is a growing body of research suggesting that *code-switching* (shifting back and forth between the target language and other languages known to the students) aids learning in cases where the students' L2 repertoire limits their ability to express themselves or to comprehend communication in the classroom (cf. e.g. Arthur & Martin 2006; Creese & Blackledge 2010) . Similarly, the concept of *translanguaging* embodies the idea that seeing different parts of a person's linguistic repertoire as different languages is merely a social construct, and that a more holistic view is advantageous for communication and education (cf. e.g. García, Flores & Homonoff Woodley 2012).

In a longitudinal study in China, Qian, Tian & Wang (2009) found that teachers in primary school used code-switching for a variety of reasons (highlighting, praising, reminding), but that their use of the L1 decreased as the students grew older and more advanced in English. The authors concluded that codeswitching "helps cultivate and reinforce good habits of learning for students and foster healthy and close relationship [sic], especially for the lower levels" (2009 p. 729). Skilful teaching, it is thus suggested, involves an ability by the teacher to consistently use the L2 as the base language in the classroom while also allowing the use of other languages to ensure pupils' comprehension and participation.

Language use in foreign-language learning contexts in Sweden is an under-researched area, with a few exceptions: Beers Fägersten (2012) studied how "language functions in and is influenced by the sociocultural setting of the EFL classroom" (p. 81) and concluded, among other things, that while English was the predominant language in a classroom studied by her, Swedish was used for regulatory and disciplinary discourse; Amir (2013) described how monolingual norms in English classrooms in grades 8 and 9 were "self-policed" by both teachers and students; Gunnarsson, Housen, van de Weijer & Källkvist (2015), finally, investigated how English L2 and L3 learners in upper-secondary school utilized their L1 and/or L2 in writing essays in English. In other words, there are few studies of actual classroom practices in Swedish schools, and no recent ones that aim to correlate either code-switching or consistent L2 use by teachers with successful language learning in students. Nor have we found any studies regarding language use in EYL contexts in Sweden.

Still, using English 'authentically' as the natural base language during English lessons ought to be the encouraged norm in the light of research emphasizing the need for authentic, natural language in learning materials (cf. 2.3 below), and in view of the fact that children in Sweden are regularly exposed to authentic English through different media channels (cf. section 1 above). This places high demands on teachers, particularly given the multilingual nature of most classrooms in Swedish schools today (cf. Tholin 2012 p. 253).

2.3 Communicative, contextualized learning tasks and activities: the significance of children's literature

As indicated above, the Swedish National Agency for Education considers communicative competence one of the primary objectives for the subject English in primary and secondary school (Skolverket 2011). Communicative language teaching and contextualized learning tasks are two sides of the same coin, since "communication that is meaningful to the learner provides a better opportunity for learning than through a grammar-based approach", as Richards (2006 p. 12) puts it. Similarly, Hadaway et al. (2002) claim that contextualized language is "more meaningful than skill-oriented materials" (p. 41) and that "[t]o provide the optimal input for language development, teachers should ensure that they model language that is meaningful, natural, useful and relevant to children" (p. 42). The importance of working with interesting, engaging content is also pointed out by Lundberg (2007), among others.

Unfortunately, traditional textbooks for English classes have long been influenced by the idea that "acquisition of syntactic features is a necessary precursor for conventional use of language" (Larsen-Freeman and Long, cited in Ghosn 2013 p. 13). This idea has led to the production of textbooks for young learners in which the students meet only simple structures and

are expected to learn them before more complex ones are introduced. As Ghosn points out, this is contrary to recent brain research which emphasizes that the brain develops through multidirectional connections between neurons in the brain that process simpler as well as more complex, abstract information synchronically (Genesee, cited in Ghosn 2013 p. 14). In other words, the development of young learners' brains – and by extension their linguistic abilities – will benefit from input that takes this circumstance into account.

One way of doing this in the EFL classroom is to broaden and contextualize the linguistic input provided by basing instruction to a significant extent on children's literature, which is a suitable tool for language acquisition even for learners who are not proficient readers themselves, since they can *listen* to e.g. the teacher reading.[2] In fact, listening to stories is "not only an effective means of foreign language acquisition, but is also highly efficient", according to Mason (2013 p. 25). Between 1997 and 2009, she conducted a series of investigations into the potential of comprehension-based methods in foreign-language acquisition in Japan and compared these methods to more traditional ones or a combination of methods. Listening to stories proved as effective as traditional methods or even more so: the students learned as many or more new words and retention rates were higher. When the time spent on the different methods was taken into account, listening to stories also turned out to be more *efficient*. In a recent Taiwanese study, Chou (2014) similarly found that young English learners significantly improved their vocabulary and were more motivated to learn when classes were built around games, stories and songs.

In EYL contexts, picture books are especially attractive because of the added visual cues that will aid understanding (Hadaway et al. 2002). Even 9-10-year-old L2 learners will benefit from reading picture books when it comes to reading motivation, confidence and competence. A study by Kolb (2013) showed that primary-school children were able to engage with picture books on their own, making use of a variety of comprehension strategies, such as interpreting the pictures, guessing from content, and reading for gist. Children's literature may thus even be said to encourage the development of comprehension strategies referred to in the Swedish curriculum (see the quote in 2.1 above).

Linse points out that children's books often use predictable and repetitive language, which promotes language learning, though in a more engaging way than educational materials (2007). Yet literature can also easily be employed as the point of departure for teacher-led activities that

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2   Note that, in our understanding, *literature* comprises a wide range of cultural expressions such as songs, rhymes, games, poems, picture books, stories and other types of texts that offer a natural, authentic language, engaging content and styles suitable for different age groups.

increase motivation, lessen anxiety and promote cooperation, and it can be adapted to suit a wide variety of learning styles. It also, among other things, "creates a meaningful conceptual framework", provides "models of many organizational structures, language styles and techniques", and "helps develop fluency" (Hadaway et al. 2002 p. 42).

Even specific linguistic aspects such as grammatical constructions can be acquired by engaging in meaningful communicative tasks (cf. Ghosn 2002; Tomasello 2003; Krashen 2004). This is not surprising, considering the results of one study comparing stories and pedagogical texts for vocabulary – and finding that the storybooks provided twice as many nouns and three times as many verbs as the pedagogical texts (Lee et al., cited in Krashen, 2013). More specifically, Ghosn (2013) has argued for the importance of stories for the acquisition of past tense forms of verbs, which are very common in stories as well as everyday language, yet very rare in textbooks for young learners: "Story narratives can facilitate the acquisition of past tense verb forms children need in their own communication" (p. 15).

Among the many other publications supporting the use of literature in connection with foreign language learning are Curtain (1991) and Ghosn (2002). Among the genres not yet mentioned, drama and role-playing games are often recommended for the language classroom (Hadaway et al. 2002; Allström 2010; Ahlquist 2015).

However, in order to use children's literature to good effect in the EYL classroom, teachers need to be able to read aloud and to introduce and talk about the literature in English. The English spoken by the teacher usually becomes the primary model for the youngest children and is thus a significant factor in EFL instruction, especially for young learners.

3. Study 1

In the autumn 2012, we the authors and our colleague Helena Darnell-Berggren visited a number of EYL classrooms in the Mälardalen region, with the purpose of gaining some first impressions of the conditions and realities at Swedish primary schools in general and in EYL classrooms in particular. As pointed out in the introduction, these visits, the data collected on those occasions, and the results derived from the data were intended to function as preparation for a larger project that would, at least in the initial stages, tackle very similar issues, though on a significantly extended scale.

3.1 Methods and material

In August 2012, we contacted, by e-mail, all the headmasters of all the schools in one Swedish municipality that offered grades 1-3, with or without a preceding preschool class (see section 2.1). We requested them to return a simple questionnaire asking for information about the number of students enrolled in each grade F-3, as well as the average number of teaching hours in the English subject for each grade. We also asked about

the school's, and in particular its English teachers', interest in participating in further studies regarding English for Young Learners. If there was interest, the respondents were to provide the name and contact details of at least one teacher at their school.

The return rate for this questionnaire was very low and did not yield representative results regarding the number of teaching hours in English in the various grades, but it brought us into contact with the teachers at two primary schools in the municipality who were interested in helping us with our data collection. Eventually, and after having gained all the concerned teachers' and guardians' permission (the latter with the help of a written note forwarded to the students' homes via the teachers), we were offered the opportunity to observe and video-record a total of five English lessons at the two schools (henceforth referred to as *A* and *B*). The data collected thus represents a convenience sample that is unlikely to be representative of Swedish primary schools in general.

School A is situated in a semi-rural community within easy commuting distance from a big city. At the time of the data collection, the large majority of its students had an ethnic Swedish background, as did the teachers. At School A we observed one lesson each in grades 1, 2 and 3, with three different teachers, who were also interviewed afterwards. School B is situated in one of the comparatively central suburbs of the city mentioned and had a more mixed student population in terms of ethnic and linguistic background at the time. We observed one English lesson in preschool class and one in grade 2 at that school. All the lessons and the interviews were video-recorded to facilitate a subsequent, more in-depth analysis. The average number of students in each classroom observed was around 20, and the lessons themselves lasted between 20 and 35 minutes.

While preparing for our study, and also during the data collection process as well as afterwards, we have followed the ethical guidelines laid down by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet 2011). These regard *informed consent* and *voluntary participation* (teachers, students and guardians were informed of the study and the recordings beforehand and were free not to participate or not to let their child(ren) participate; cf. the note to the guardians mentioned above), *anonymity* (we did not note any of the students' names, and neither the teachers' nor the schools' or the municipality's identities will be revealed, or the recordings be spread), and *usage* (the results will be published and shared for academic purposes only and not be used commercially). No reward was offered for participation.

3.2 Results

In what follows, *A* stands for the school in the semi-rural neighbourhood and *B* for the city school, in accordance with the description in 3.1. The numbers *1-3* refer to grades, as does *P* (= 'preschool class'), so that *A2* means 'the lesson observed in grade 2 at school A', for example.

3.2.1 L2 vs L1 use in the classroom

Originally, one of our main interests was the extent to which the target language (L2 English) was used in the English lessons we observed, compared to the teachers' and most students' L1, i.e. Swedish. However, rather than carry out exact quantitative measurements, let alone in-depth qualitative analyses, we shall limit ourselves to general impressions here.

What was striking was that in all three lessons A1, A2 and A3, the teachers used Swedish to a much greater extent than English, and there was no noticeable reduction of the share of L1 use in the later classes either, unlike what was reported by Qian, Tian & Wang (2009). In B2, by contrast, the teacher spoke English almost all the time, with some words and explanations in Swedish being the absolute exception. In BP finally, which, it should be remembered, included the youngest students, Swedish was *slightly* dominant in quantitative terms in the teacher's utterances, though English was used consistently, too.

That said, the teachers' talk was not the only input the students received in school A. In all three lessons, the teachers chose to show ready-made audiovisual EYL material via the interactive whiteboard in the classrooms. In A1 and A2, the films were entirely in English, while the one shown in A3 was mostly in English, with an introduction in Swedish. In other words, the students in school A did get some sizeable English input during their lessons, though not so much from the teachers. (For more details on the audiovisual materials used, also in B2, see 3.2.2.2.) In BP, no films or other materials featuring other speakers than the teachers were used.

When it comes to the *students'* contributions in terms of language choice, the respective shares for each language more or less corresponded to what the teachers did: very little English from the students in all three classes in school A, somewhat more Swedish than English in BP, and a very clear dominance of English in B2. It can also be pointed out that we registered no use of *additional* languages in the classroom. While we cannot rule out that two or more students may have said something to each other – more or less secretly – in a shared L1 other than English or Swedish (especially school B had many students with an immigrant background, as mentioned above), we did not witness any such occurrence. The use of other languages was, in any case, not explicitly condoned by the teachers, nor was it implicitly encouraged through the organization of the lessons.

3.2.2 Teaching and learning materials used in the classroom

3.2.2.1 Own body, clothes, toys, drawings or other objects

With the exception of A3, all the lessons built to some extent on the use of and reference to physical objects introduced to or already present in the classrooms. Parts of the body and articles of clothing were frequent foci,

e.g. in the song *Heads, shoulders knees and toes*, and often in combination with colours, e.g. when a volunteer stood in front of the class for the purpose of being described. In other cases, features of the classroom itself or picture cards showing food items such as biscuits, a cake, fish and carrots would also be used for activities of this kind, as were, in one case, pictures drawn by the students themselves. In BP, the teacher had brought a cloth bag that was passed around among the students sitting in a ring, each of whom, without looking, had to take out one of the toy animals contained in the bag and adapt, to the extent they were able to, a pre-formulated sentence with regard to the animal found, e.g. *This is a [cow/pig/sheep/etc.]*.

On the one hand, then, there was, in four out of five cases, some attempt at integrating the students' physical environment into the lessons, as well as "subject areas that are familiar to the pupils" (Skolverket 2011 p. 33). On the other hand, this in itself can hardly be considered contextualized or authentic language use, as the objects, colours etc. were not discussed because of their intrinsic interest in a given situation, but just as any illustration in a language course book or on a hand-out might. Put differently, there was no obvious *reason* to talk about those objects other than to practice a number of constructions and terms from a limited range of lexical fields, such as colours and clothes.

Furthermore, the number and scope of these fields did not seem to increase much with the students' age either. In fact, the descriptor *talk* may also be rather misleading, as there was rarely any true negotiation or interaction regarding a point: almost everything took place in classical question-answer exchanges, with most of the student output being one- or two-word utterances and occasional one-clause sentences in the present tense, such as *This is a cow* or *Peter has a blue sweater*, addressed at the teacher. That said, the students were in most cases clearly engaged and interested in these kinds of exchanges.

3.2.2.2 Films and songs, books and handouts

As pointed out above, all three A classes included moving pictures of some kind: animated material shown on the interactive whiteboard. In two of three classes, the students were able follow the same material in their textbooks. The films consisted largely of animated scenes focusing on the vocabulary of a lexical field (clothes, names, colours, foods, etc.), with utterances in the present tense, e.g. the following sentences spoken by cartoon penguins in A1: *My name is Elliot – My name is Lily – What's your name?* and *The grass is green – The sky is blue*.

In A2, the class watched an episode from *Kids English Zone*, featuring two native-English-speaking girls unpacking their shopping bag, holding much the same content as the picture cards referred to above: carrots, fish, etc. The spoken output was limited to the name of the product and an interjection expressing like or dislike, e.g. *Apple, yum! Carrot, yuck!*, or short sentences such as *I'm eating chicken – I'm eating cake*.

The A3 class watched a movie about clothes and was introduced to the new words first, both by the teacher on the whiteboard and at the beginning of the movie: *A dress! A shirt! A skirt!* The movie then introduced a limited story line, but in the present tense and, curiously enough, in Swedish: *Det har blivit sommarlov* ['The summer holidays have started'] or *Emma och Tom ska åka på läger* ['Emma and Tom are going to camp']. The ensuing conversation was in short English sentences, however: *Have you got a jacket? – Of course I have.*

The interactive whiteboard material in A1 and A3 also included songs with the lyrics shown on the screen. The songs were characterized by a simple, limited vocabulary, with little or no visual or other contextualization, but plenty of repetition. A2 watched and sang along to a song performed by cartoon penguins, consisting of the lyrics *Good morning, good morning, good morning to you!* A3, almost predictably, also sang a song about clothes, featuring lines such as *Jenny's scarf is black and green – Whose scarf is it?* Most of the children in all classes sang along to the music when given the chance and repeated phrases in the movies, even when they were not expressly invited to do so.

Interactive whiteboard applications (games or pictures other than movies) with native English voices were also used in A3 and B2. These examples of interactive media usage were briefly introduced by the teacher: in Swedish in A3, in English in B2. There was, however, no evaluation, discussion or other form of communication about the movies, songs or interactive pictures after the viewings.

While some textbooks and books with grammar and/or vocabulary exercises were used in A2 and A3, none of the five lessons we observed included narratives, picture books, or stories of any kind. In our interviews with the teachers that followed the observations, we asked whether they considered what we had seen as typical and representative in terms of materials used, and all answered in the affirmative. We also asked if they ever used children's books, or stories of some kind, and got only negative responses.

3.2.3 Summary and discussion

In summary, then, although we certainly saw some evidence of lessons dealing with aspects of the core content specified in the curriculum, e.g. "words and phrases in their local surroundings" (Skolverket 2011 p. 33), our findings as a whole were rather disappointing. We saw little of what the literature has promoted as good practice in the EYL classroom, e.g. the use of children's literature or other contextualized, natural and authentic language (e.g. Hadaway et al.; Kolb 2013; Krashen 2013; Chou 2014), and the "dramatised narratives" and "poems and sagas" specified in the core content of the curriculum (Skolverket 2011 p. 33) were conspicuous by their absence. Focus was clearly placed on teaching individual words and simple constructions, with little or no contextualization other than the

situation itself: *What colour are your socks? – My socks are blue.* This follows the problematic pattern identified by Ghosn (2013): traditional teaching and traditional textbooks expose learners only to single words and simple phrases, with the idea that more complex patterns will be introduced later, when the simple ones have been internalized. Her view that stories are needed for practicing certain grammatical features such as the past tense (2013 p. 15) can also be supported by our observation in so far as the children did not get this opportunity from the simple question-answer exchanges they were exposed to.

Not only does this seem to stand in contrast to recent brain research, which shows that young learners' developing brains are able to take in different kinds of information, both low-order and high-order, simultaneously (cf. Genesee, cited in Ghosn 2014) – it constitutes a lost opportunity to make the young learners interested in listening to and reading stories, which studies suggest is not only an effective but also an *efficient* means of learning a foreign language (Mason 2013). This aspect must not be underestimated in view of the few hours available for English instruction in Swedish primary school (cf. Skolverket n.d.). Furthermore, an English class without stories deprives the young learners of opportunities to practice comprehension-enhancing strategies like reading for gist, exploring illustrations and predicting the outcome (cf. Kolb 2013), which ought to be part of the communicative and problem-solving skills emphasized by the curriculum (Skolverket 2011).

 We saw in fact very little communication in English among the students, other than when they responded in set phrases to the teacher's questions. Furthermore, the dominance of Swedish in many of the observed classrooms showed that unless the teacher is an exceptional model of the target language, a classroom without stories or similar media is also going to lack a reliable source of natural and authentic target language utterances.

A problem here might be the fact that many teachers in primary school (especially F-3 teachers who received their university education before the new teacher study programmes were introduced in 2011) seemed to have had little or no training in English. The interviews we conducted after the observations confirmed this. The only teacher who used the target language more or less consistently in class (B2) was also the only one who had studied English at the university level. Our interview material is of course much too small to draw any firm conclusions, but it lends some support to the common-sense notion that anybody who is not comfortable using the language her- or himself will not be a good model of the language for young learners. While this can to some extent be compensated for by the use of pre-recorded audiovisual material, as suggested by e.g. Brown (2007 p. 138), this material still needs to be of a suitable kind and dealt with in meaningful ways.

On a more positive note, the F-3 teacher students at Mälardalen University now get an English course which emphasizes not only language proficiency but also the use of children's literature in EYL teaching, and they are trained in the skills required for introducing picture books and reading aloud in their classes.

4. Study 2

In 2015, we carried out another small study with a focus similar to that of Study 1 (essentially: activities, language use and challenges in Swedish EYL classrooms), but based on a different method of data collection and a new set of informants. Like its predecessor, Study 2 was intended as a pilot for a larger project (cf. 1.1), but since it yielded interesting data complementing the impressions gained from Study 1 while painting a slightly different picture of the situation in some respects, we think that the more recent results are worth sharing, too.

4.1 Methods and material

In the spring term 2015, a number of meetings took place between representatives of the teacher education programmes at Mälardalen University and active teachers from different municipalities in the region. The general purpose was to discuss issues of common interest, especially students' field studies and work placements (i.e. minor investigations at the schools as well as longer practice periods) and how they might be organized in the best possible way. We the authors of the present report each joined one of the meetings with primary school teachers, in two different locations, partly in order to take part in the discussions as the University's representatives for the English subject, partly with the purpose of collecting data from the teachers.

We had prepared and printed out a questionnaire, at the beginning of which we explained, among other things, that the first students enrolled in the new F-3 teacher education would soon be studying English with us, and that we the teacher educators needed to get a better idea of the pedagogy employed in the EYL classrooms that the students were being trained for. We also assured the potential participants that their answers would remain anonymous. In general, we once again followed the principles laid down by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet 2011; cf. 3.1 above).

Apart from the introductory notes and an appendix (see 4.2.3), the questionnaire comprised seven items or questions, of which the first four focused on our core interests outlined above (activities and language use during EYL lessons, but also challenges experienced by the teachers in that context). The first three items were combinations of closed and open questions, of varying complexity, while the fourth one was open. All of

these will be introduced and discussed in more detail in 4.2. The last three items were simple, open questions concerning the participants' teaching experience on the F-3 level in quantitative terms, both in general and with regard to English.

In total, 26 teachers agreed to participate and returned a partly or completely filled-in questionnaire. However, 4 of these were subsequently excluded from further analysis due to the respondents not being active teachers of English at the time of the data collection, according to their own written comments. (3 respondents explained that they worked in pre-school classes where no English instruction occurred.) Of the remainder, 14 attended the meeting in one municipality (referred to as *M1* below), and 8 in another (*M2*), though some participants in either group may actually have been employed in other, neighbouring municipalities.

All the respondents were female, which is normal for that level of education in Sweden. Apart from that, they differed enormously in terms of teaching experience on the F-3 level, which varied from very limited (0.5 years) to close-to-a-whole-working-life (38 years), with an average of about a dozen years (some of the answers were somewhat unclear). Experience of teaching *English* on that level differed almost as much (0.5-30 years), with an average of about 10 years. As to the grades in which the teachers normally taught English, that too varied, with a majority indicating years 2-3, while a larger share of teachers in M2 than M1 also included grade 1. The answers here may reflect the fact that different schools (and/or municipalities) may choose to start their English instruction in different grades, but that by grade 3 every school *has* to provide such instruction (cf. 2.1).

4.2 Results

The order in which we present the results of Study 2 below is intended to mirror the corresponding order for Study 1 above. We will thus begin with the issue of language use in the classroom, even though it was addressed by the *second* question in the questionnaire, and only then move on to classroom activities and materials, despite the fact that this was the topic of the *first* question. We shall then add some brief comments regarding questions 3 and 4 in the questionnaire, where we attempted to relate classroom practices to the curriculum.

4.2.1 L2 vs L1 use in the classroom

Question 2 was, in English translation, *How important do you think it is to always only speak English with the students in connection with an English lesson?* Four answer alternatives were offered (see Table 1), and there was also the possibility to write a comment, which, in fact, the majority of the respondents chose to make use of.

Table 1. The importance of only using English in English lessons.

	not important	rather important	important	very important
M1	1	7	3	3
M2	0	2	5	1
Total	1	9	8	4

As can be seen in Table 1, the results varied widely, and no clear pattern emerged. Overall, the spread of opinions was greater in Municipality 1, while the respondents in Municipality 2 accorded the exclusive use of English in English lessons a somewhat greater importance *on average*. However, if we consider that all but one of the respondents found it important to *some* degree "to always only speak English", this still seems to stand in contrast to what we observed in four out of five classes in Study 1.

That said, the individual comments added by most of the teachers provide some background information regarding their choice of answer alternative and help to paint a more nuanced picture. For example, several teachers claimed that they used English-Swedish translation in their classes when they felt the need, and even one of the M1 teachers who had ticked *important* added "when the students don't know so much English it is good to explain/translate what one has said in English"[3], thereby seemingly contradicting herself. A teacher in M2, who had also marked *important*, wrote "we sometimes need to translate in order not to create anxiety in the student". On the one hand, then, many teachers considered an exclusive use of English important, but, on the other hand, some of those teachers did not actually follow this principle in practice. It is also possible, however, that certain informants missed the word *only* in the question or interpreted it, perhaps subconsciously, as meaning 'as much as possible'.

In another group of comments, it was pointed out that language use in the classroom is partly a matter of age: the younger the students, the more Swedish. Some of the comments actually combined the aspects of age and translation: "Depending on the year. The older the students the more English talk. With the younger ones I first say [something] in English, then the same thing in Swedish." In other words, what was described here is reminiscent of what we observed in class BP in Study 1, and none of the respondents actually confirmed in their comments that they would use only English in their English lessons. On the contrary: most of the comment writers explained that – or indeed why – they did not perceive an English-only approach possible in practice. Of the four respondents who had ticked *very important*, only one added a comment, the interpretation of

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[3]   Any 'quotes' of teachers' comments are in fact our translations from the original Swedish.

which is somewhat uncertain in the present context: "[I] work a lot with choral speech". It may mean that this teachers' students always repeat in unison what she says (cf. Hadaway et al. 2002), which of course would result in rather one-sided communication.

4.2.2 Teaching and learning materials/activities used in the classroom

In the first question of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to mark to what extent, from *never* to *very often*, they used a certain type of material or activity in their English lessons. The responses are summarized in Table 2, which, apart from the numbers and the fact that it is in English, closely resembles the original table in which the teachers were supposed to make their marks. However, a *no answer* column has been added in Table 2 for the few cases where teachers did not give any answer for the material/activity in question.[4]

Table 2. Activities/materials used in English lessons.

	no answer	never	rarely	quite often	very often
Rhymes and chants	1	1	5	**10**	5
Music and singing games			3	**13**	6
Reading aloud of tales and other stories		4	**12**	5	1
Individual reading		9	**12**	1	
Filmed narratives (e.g. smartboard/iPad)		4	3	**12**	3
Drama games		6	6	**9**	1
Drawing/painting		3	**11**	5	3
Games (board/card/ computer games)		3	8	**11**	
Practice books		5	**10**	6	1
Apps (iPad/smartphone) for e.g. vocabulary		10	**11**	1	
Vocabulary lists		**14**	6	2	
Presentations of different kinds	2	3	6	**8**	3

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4   In M2, one respondent put her marks on the line between *never* and *rarely* in connection with three activities/materials (*drawing/painting*, *games*, *presentations*). These marks were counted as *rarely* in Table 2.

For ease of analysis, the most frequently chosen alternatives have been printed in bold face in Table 2. As can be seen, no middle-of-the-road option, such as *regularly* or *every now and then*, was offered to the respondents in the questionnaire, so there is a rather clear divide between the two alternatives that could be summarized as 'unpopular' on the one hand (*never* and *rarely*) and the two that could be interpreted as 'popular' on the other (*quite/very often*). We can thus distinguish some obviously common activities/materials (*rhymes and chants*, *music and singing games*, *filmed narratives*) and another set of clearly more uncommon ones (*reading aloud* or *individually*, *drawing/painting*, *practice books*, *apps for e.g. vocabulary*, *vocabulary lists*).

There are also a few categories that yielded a slightly more complex outcome: for example, the most frequently chosen answer for both *drama games* and (other kinds of) *games* was *quite often*, but at least half of the answers still remained on the 'unpopular' side of the scale. When it comes to *presentations of different kinds*, the picture turned out very mixed, possibly because the respondents read different things into this category (student vs teacher presentations; formal/planned vs informal/spontaneous; with or without visual support?), which might also explain why two teachers provided no answer at all for this category. It can be added, finally, that in the space provided for that purpose, only one respondent wrote a category of her own, namely "films", which she claimed to use *quite often*. While this tallies with the result for *filmed narratives*, it may have been an attempt to distinguish between films in general and filmed narratives more specifically.

Just as in connection with question 2, the teachers were free to add a comment here. Interestingly, of the ten who chose to do so, several did not actually comment on the activities in class so much as their own teaching situation (which grades they were teaching at the time or even the fact that "… in my class with 23 students I have one student with Swedish-speaking parents"). This might partly be explained by the fact that this was the first question of the questionnaire, and some teachers may have felt the need to clarify their background at the first opportunity. Among the information provided in the comments, it is worth noting that some of the teachers who worked at schools where English was not officially taught until grade 3 (cf. 2.1) seemed to experience this as too late and thus introduced the language, in more or less informal ways, already in grade 2. Another teacher pointed out that, in her grade 1 class, "when it comes to reading and writing in English it is difficult since they haven't learned that in Swedish yet". The comment quoted above, about the exceptionally high share of students with an immigrant background in one teacher's class, may also have been triggered by realizations of this kind.

4.2.3 Working with the "core content" described in the Curriculum

With the help of questions 3 and 4 in the questionnaire, we tried to link the teachers' work in their English classes to what is stipulated regarding the F-3 teaching and learning content in the Curriculum (see 2.1). Ques-

tion 3, in an approximate English translation, was *Considering the resources you have at your disposal, how do you think it is to work in accordance with the core content in the syllabus for years 1-3 […]? Circle the answer that best corresponds to your opinion.* Since we did not expect the teachers to know this core content by heart, we provided it on an additional sheet of paper, which they were free to keep afterwards. As can be seen in Table 3, most of the respondents in both municipalities found it *quite easy* to work with the core content.

Table 3. How easy it is to work with the core content.

	easy	*quite easy*	*quite difficult*	*very difficult*
M1	1	11	2	
M2	2	6		
Total	3	17	2	

One of the two teachers who had marked *easy* in M2 wrote that she thought it was "good content to start from", presumably meaning that she found the core content described in the Curriculum to be appropriate for her own purposes or perhaps more generally for young language learners. Apart from that teacher, only three others wrote a comment, including the two who had chosen the alternative *quite difficult*. All of them pointed to the limited amount of time set aside for English instruction, e.g. "It's not a lot of English per week after all and therefore difficult to get far in the subject".

The completely open question 4 asked for a description of any *specific challenges in the work with the core content* that the teachers might be experiencing. Exactly half of the respondents in both M1 and M2 chose to write an answer, and a few recurring topics can be identified. One has to do with the difficulty of practicing oral communication *with* all students to a significant extent and/or to supervise communication *among* the students, partly because some children may be shy ("the children need to feel safe in order to dare"), partly because the classes are experienced as too large and/or the available time as too short for such activities ("It is tricky to find the time to listen to all students when English is taught in whole classes and there are 25-28 students/class").

Another couple of comments concerned the problem of working with reading and writing, which some teachers experienced to be an even greater challenge than oral interaction, especially for some students: "Learning functions well in the beginning, when the students listen, sing, practice without masses of text and word description [sic]. The difficulties come when students who do not understand or cannot read Swedish are to write

more words than two or read printed text." Apparently, this teacher perceived a connection between a poor knowledge of Swedish and difficulties to read and write in English, but this was not made explicit.

Finally, a perceived shortage of teaching materials, especially "films and dramatized narratives" was mentioned three times in M1, partly in relation to a lack of funding: "Since there often isn't any money for teaching materials in English, because most of the time the support goes to the basic subjects Sw[edish] and Ma[thematics], it is time-consuming to produce a lot of one's own material." All of these issues were only taken up by some individual teachers, however, and, as pointed out above, half of the respondents did not seem to experience any obstacles worth commenting on at all.

4.3 Summary and discussion

This second study, based on a questionnaire distributed to teachers who were already gathered in one place, eventually included four times the number of teachers we could involve in Study 1. The participants thus represented many more schools, as well as a greater range of age cohorts and levels of experience. Quite predictably then, the results were more varied too, for example when it comes to language use in the classroom.

Although a majority of the teachers' answers show a positive attitude to only using English in the classroom, the added comments suggest that even respondents who thought this was important actually translated some or possibly most, if not all, English input into Swedish, especially with the younger children. While, as we have seen, some research on language use in the classroom indicates that *code-switching* may be used for particular purposes or for very young children (see 2.2 above), consistent translation significantly decreases the amount of L2 input available, especially for young learners who rely largely on listening to the teacher for their language exposure (cf. e.g. Nikolov and Curtain 2000; Pinter 2006; Lundahl 2014). In fact, Pinter goes so far as to claim that "[t]eachers' confidence and willingness to use the language naturally in the classroom is a key component of success" (2006 p. 39). Given that, in the Swedish Curriculum, communicative competence is partly described in terms of familiarity with strategies that can assist comprehension (Skolverket 2011 p. 32), teachers need to be able to model such strategies, e.g. by using gestures, re-formulations, repetitions, questions etc. instead of immediately resorting to translation. The fact that none of the comments (apart from one that included the word *explain*) suggested using other strategies to ease comprehension is therefore a little worrying. It seems to be reason enough, in any case, to consider the matter more closely in subsequent studies.

One factor that may help explain the teachers' apparently frequent use of translation is something that we did not ask about specifically, but

that came up in some of the comments: the size of the class. If the teacher is in effect trying to keep up a conversation in a foreign language, with 25 or more students of varying proficiency, it can indeed seem a daunting task where the shortcut of translation readily presents itself as a possible survival strategy.

The question about materials and activities used in the English classroom was partly based on the core content in the curriculum, with some additional categories that we have seen being used, such as iPads and interactive whiteboards, or the children's own drawings. More than half of the teachers confirmed that they used rhymes and chants, as well as music, singing and drama (which are all part of the core content and also part of what the literature suggests are effective means for language learning (e.g. Hadaway et al. 2002; Lundberg 2007; Allström 2010; Chou 2014; Ahlquist 2015).) That so many teachers used these methods and materials with their young learners, while comparatively few used vocabulary lists and practice books, is reassuring.

Another point remains to be raised: the many responses according to which *filmed narratives* are used *quite often* or even *very often* in EYL class. This item on the list originates from the core content in the curriculum, but is in fact rather difficult to interpret. Is the focus on the medium (film) or the message (narrative)? The fact that many if not all teachers seemed to have access to technology required for showing films is promising, as the amount of material available online, for instance, is of course staggering. On the other hand, we have to recall the comments that readymade material (which presumably comes at a cost) was not provided for English instruction and that some teachers found it difficult and time-consuming to create their own. We will return to the question of filmed material in the next and final section.

The negative responses to reading (aloud and individually) were somewhat surprising. Different types of texts, including sagas, are part of the core content, and as we have shown, the research is very clear on the significance of children's literature and other types of narratives for young language learners (e.g. Bland and Lütge 2012; Krashen 2004, 2013). We have also established the teacher's important role as a source of natural and authentic input, which, one could argue, comes readymade in a storybook and can therefore be easily reproduced. Yet only a very small number of the respondents read aloud to their classes, and only one of the respondents answered that they let the students practice individual reading. Of course, the latter might be too daunting for children who do not read very well in their first language yet, but the apparently negative attitude to reading aloud is difficult to explain. As shown by Kolb's study (2012), picture books in English can provide excellent learning material for young learners, as well as a way of "learning to learn" (Pinter 2006 p. 99ff), which in a sense, and as pointed out, is also emphasized as a communicative skill in the curriculum (Skolverket 2011 p. 32).

5. Concluding discussion

The two investigations presented above were different in method and scope, but both aimed to cast some light on current practices in English for young learners' classrooms in Sweden. Although the small numbers of participants preclude any wide generalizations, we believe that we may have revealed some interesting tendencies – and in particular factors to consider for teacher educators like ourselves.

One conclusion that can be drawn is that although many teachers seem to believe (in concurrence with most of the literature) that it is important to speak only or predominantly English in the classroom, this ideal is in fact not commonly upheld in practice. Three of the five teachers we observed in Study 1 spoke very little English in class themselves, and only slightly more than half of the teachers in Study 2 considered "English only" important or very important (and even some of those may not have followed the principle in practice, as suggested by the comments).

The very idea that Swedish teachers of English be able to provide not only natural and authentic but also fluent, idiomatic and correct spoken English input for their young students may often turn out to be quite unrealistic, considering how little English is included in the teachers' education. Until not so long ago, some F-3 teachers seem not to have studied any English at all as part of their teacher training, to judge from some of the spoken comments we received in e.g. the interviews conducted as part of Study 1, and many active teachers thus have to rely on what they remember from their own school years or have acquired in other ways.[5]

The teachers' possible lack of confidence in their own English proficiency naturally affects their willingness to use it at all (cf. Pinter 2006) but also, one might suspect, their ability to put it to good use in certain set situations such as reading aloud and adapting their language to children of varying proficiency, e.g. by rephrasing or repeating key words, gesturing, or dramatizing stories (cf. e.g. Pinter 2006; Hadaway et al. 2002). This suspicion is indeed corroborated by the impressions gained in Study 1, where no stories or children's literature of any kind were used to teach English, and by the small number of respondents in Study 2 who ticked the box for reading aloud. It is indeed easy to imagine that a teacher who feels insecure about her or his ability to read a story well enough to get and keep the children's attention will often resort to materials with pre-recorded spoken English.

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[5] Today, Mälardalen University's teacher programme for F-3 includes 15 credits of English, i.e. half a term's worth of study, whereas the 4-6 teachers get 30 credits or a full term. It is the same at virtually all other Swedish universities: far too little for many students, in our opinion. (By comparison, teacher students in the upper-secondary teacher programme get three or four terms of English as part of their education.)

It then becomes a question of what kind of material is available or possible for the teachers to find. As we saw in some of the comments in Study 2, teaching materials such as filmed narratives for the interactive whiteboards did not always seem to be included in the budget for English, and, as we observed in the classroom in Study 1, even when there is material available, it can be of varying quality and suitability. The videos we observed followed the logic of traditional printed materials and were characterized by simple grammatical constructions in the present tense, question-answer drills, and a general lack of contextualization – all traits to be avoided, according to the research (e.g. Ghosn 2013). And even though an enormous range of readings, dramatizations and other versions of children's literature may be freely available online, the identification and selection of suitable materials for a given class and time is, perhaps, not the first priority for busy teachers having to teach in all kinds of subjects.

Even though our two studies were limited in scope, they suggest, we would argue, a picture of English for young learners in Sweden that is not altogether positive. English instruction does begin early in many cases, which is what is generally recommended (though it begins even earlier in many other European countries), but the similarly recommended high exposure to the target language in the classroom is typically not achieved, for various reasons. Also, the young learners' need for teaching materials that focus on listening and speaking (rather than reading and writing) might be partly catered for in the form of rhymes and games, whereas the benefits of children's literature, narratives and other types of contextualized language are typically not realized at all.

Among the many follow-up studies that suggest themselves at this point are an inventory of the actual level of English proficiency among primary school teachers, an investigation into the attitudes to English among students enrolled in the F-3 teacher programmes, and an analysis of currently available teaching materials for F-3 English. Obviously, whatever can be done to raise the quality of EYL instruction and outcomes, also under adverse conditions, should be done.

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