Teaching and Assessing Students’ accents
- The Challenge of Working with the Multitude of Accents in the English-Speaking World

Att undervisa och bedöma elevers uttal
Utmaningen att arbeta med de många dialekter som finns i den engelsktalande världen

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Abstract:
Today, English is a world language and more English accents have appeared. Today it is more difficult to teach English in Sweden due to the fact that we do not know when, where or how we are going to use English in the future. This study therefore focuses on how English teachers in Swedish upper secondary school teach and assess students’ accents, and the challenge of working with the multitude of accents of the English-speaking world. This study is based on a questionnaire that was sent electronically to English teachers. The results from this study show that English teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools work with different English accents in class. The results also show that over fifty percent of the teachers do not let students choose accents for them to work with; most of the teachers’ choose which accents should be introduced and worked with in class. Moreover, students’ grades are not affected by the accent they speak, which is in line with the English syllabus. In conclusion, it is clear that British and American English are still dominant in Swedish school today.

Keywords: World English, Teaching, Oral assessment, Swedish learners, Teachers, Accents, Upper secondary school.
Sammanfattning på svenska:

Idag är engelska ett världsspråk och fler engelska dialekter har dykt upp. Idag har det blivit svårare att undervisa engelska i Sverige, då vi oftast inte vet när eller hur vi kommer använda det engelska språket i framtiden. Denna studie inriktar sig på hur engelskalärare i den svenska gymnasieskolan undervisar och bedömer elevers uttal, samt den utmaning som finns idag med att arbeta med de många dialekter som finns i den engelsktalande världen. Denna studie är baserad på en enkät som skickades elektroniskt till engelskalärare. Resultatet av denna studie visar att engelskalärare i svenska gymnasieskolan arbetar med olika engelska dialekter. Resultatet visar också att över femtio procent av lärarna inte låter eleverna välja själva vilka dialekter som ska introduceras, utan de flesta lärare väljer själva vilka engelska dialekter de ska arbeta med i undervisningen. Elevernas betyg är inte heller påverkade av deras val av engelsk dialekt, vilket är i linje med den engelska kursplanen. Slutligen visar det sig att brittisk och amerikansk engelska fortfarande dominerar i den svenska skolan idag.
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1. Introduction

Today the English language is one of the accepted Lingua Francas, which means it is "a common language between speakers whose native languages are different" (Oxford dictionary, n.d.). As a result of English being a mutual language by many people, there are many different spoken varieties of English today. As Marlina (2014, p.1) points out English is used, not only among native speakers, but also among and between non-native speakers, and because of that the English language may go through adaptations and changes in the future. It has also been discovered that “The recognition of numerous ‘new’ varieties of English leads to a realization that any of these Englishes could be potentially used for international communication” (Matsuda, 2012, p.4). Schools have begun working with English as an international language, but British and American English are still dominant in most international schools today (Matsuda, 2012, p.3). This is because of the social, economic, traditional and cultural influence England and the United States of America have had on the world. Moreover, Sweden has been influenced by countries with English as a mother tongue, and this has made Sweden a part of the English-speaking world. Therefore, it is crucial to teach Swedish students to comprehend English as an international language. According to Skolverket (2011b), English teachers are supposed to teach students “spoken language, also with different social and dialect features”, and “social, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (p.55). The commentary material for the English syllabus states that students should develop a versatile communicative ability. They should be able to adapt their language to different situations and recipients. Students should, in a suitable way, be able to choose words and expressions depending on who they are talking to. It is therefore important that the English language is used in a meaningful way and that the English subject is used in situations that are authentic and relevant (Skolverket, 2011a).

According to Matsuda (2012, p.24), it is essential that students learn to understand that an English accent or the numerous accents they learn are just a few of many, and that the accents of their future conversation partners could, in fact, be different. It is therefore important that students learn different varieties of English so their speech can be understood by whomever they want to speak with (Smith & Nelson, 2006, p.429), since people today acquire different varieties of the English language (Mercer & Swann, 1996, p.2). However, research on how
English teachers work with accents in upper secondary school in Sweden has so far been lacking. There has been some research made in other countries, but not about working with accents and particularly not in Sweden to the best of my knowledge. This project will examine what kinds of English accents Swedish students get in touch with and whether teachers work with English as an international language. It is important to consider how teachers in Swedish upper secondary school prepare their students for the varieties of spoken English today.

1.1 Aims

The aim of this degree project is to study how teachers of English in Swedish upper secondary school work with spoken language and the multitude of accents of the English-speaking world. This project will also study if students’ grades are affected by the accent they speak. My research questions are the following:

- In what ways do English teachers in upper secondary school in Sweden work with spoken language and the multitude of accents of the English-speaking world?
- Are British and American English the preferred accents?
- Which accent/accents do the students get acquainted with? And on what grounds do teachers choose which accents, if any, to work with?
- Are students’ grades affected by the accent they speak and if so, how?

In order to answer these questions, a questionnaire was sent out electronically to teachers of English in Swedish upper secondary school.

2. Background

This section discusses the English language influence in Sweden and as a subject in Swedish school, English as an international language and provides a general overview of the teaching of English accents in Swedish school. In the last part of this section, assessment of spoken English will be discussed.
2.1 The English Language Influence in Sweden and as a Subject in Swedish School

Historically, Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries have long been influenced by other languages and cultures, primarily through trade and the spread of Christianity. During the middle ages, German was the most popular language in Europe. This was mainly due to the Hanseatic League, because of its importance and influence across a large part of northern Europe. However, during the 17th and 18th century, the German language influence diminished, and French became the fashionable language in Sweden and across most of Europe, as French was the language of the refined elite in culture, fashion and science. The time up to the 1850s is characterized by dominance for the classical languages such as Latin and Greek, but in the coming decades the modern languages such as French, German and English replaced the classic languages of Swedish higher education (Bratt, 1984, p. 79-81).

For many decades, there were an ongoing debate about which of the modern foreign languages such as French, German or English would become the second language in the Swedish school system. The debate was intense in the academic world and all sides had strong followers, but ultimately, one might say that the practical benefits of teaching modern languages won over the advocates of the classic extinct languages. Furthermore, in the late 18th century English began to increase its influence, and during the late 19th century English had become even more dominant (Rydgren, 2015).

During the 1920s and 30s, English teaching was tested in the upper parts of the Swedish school system. In 1922, a Swedish school commission described English as a world language, a perception that could hardly have been controversial in the early 1920s. Although English could not have been spoken by as many people as today worldwide, the language had gradually become “every man's language” (Johansson, 2007). A contributing factor to this development for Sweden was the great emigration to America for six decades, and by the 1920s, many Swedes had begun returning from the United States. Others had American relatives to correspond with (Johansson, 2007). The main reason why English began being taught in Sweden was firstly because of the geographical spread English had created. This occurred when England and the United States of America became powerful enough to influence other countries. They got their power from liberalism, the industrial revolution, different kinds of political movements and literature (Phillipson, 1992, p.23–24). In addition,
the English language had, in practice, begun to be used as an international language in the practical areas of life, but also for its cultural potential (Bratt, 1984, p.70).

In the autumn of 1946, English was introduced as the first foreign language of the compulsory school. In 1948, the board of the Swedish school issued a statement in the debate on a mandatory second language:

If a foreign language - and the choice is likely to fall on the English language - is introduced as a mandatory subject in compulsory school, would the old learning gap become passably bridged at least. A window would be opened to the world and to its citizens”. (SOU, 1948: 27, p.7, my translation)

Language teaching in mandatory school was no longer only intended for the most high-performing students but should from here on be available to the majority of students. This worked in favour of the English language. Because of the regulation, more students were given the opportunity to learn English. During the 1950s, different kinds of investigations were conducted regarding in what form and from which age English should be taught. In 1961, a new school committee's report, which proposed a 9-year primary school, came. English was now to be studied from fourth grade, but it was with the school reform Lgr69, that English became mandatory and taught from third grade. English was implemented in all ages down to primary school (Lindblad, 2001 p.14).

Today's English teaching in Swedish school is generally of a high quality. However, surveys have shown great differences between schools (Skolinspektionen, 2011:7). With the appearance of the internet, computer games and other forms of digital platforms, young people use English as a natural part of everyday communication with friends online. Many Swedish students have in different studies estimated that up to half of their English learning takes place outside of school (Skolinspektionen, 2011:7). In order to participate in the communication on the internet, the Swedish students must be able to express themselves and write in English in order to participate (Olsson, 2016, p. 97). However, according to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, many schools lack activities and the abilities to help develop the students’ communicative skills. The survey describes how there are lessons in English where neither the teacher nor the students speak a word of English. Most common, however, is a mixture of English and Swedish (Skolinspektionen, 2011:7). Many schools lack
systematic quality work involving teaching and results that are followed up and evaluated at
group and school level. Research shows that besides the student's own conditions, it is the
teacher and the teaching he or she conducts that are of the greatest importance for the
student's ability to reach his or her goals (Skolinspektionen, 2011:7). Students talk about how
they communicate in English in their spare time, such as on the internet, and how they can see
English films without Swedish subtitling. Their meeting with English outside of school is
poorly utilized in many of the reviewed schools. At school, many students do not feel
comfortable when they are going to speak English. Furthermore, it is very important to try to
combine these two “cultures” and get the English language as natural in the classroom as it is
outside of school (Skolinspektionen, 2011:7). English has become an everyday experience,
and most Swedes come in contact with the English language daily. As English has become so
widely used both inside and outside of the classroom, some Swedes now consider the English

2.2 English as an International Language

There are many different factors that make a language so influential and dominant that it
evolves into a world language. The historical spread and influence of the English language
began with the rise of the British Empire and the ambitious development of trade and the
pioneering voyages to America and other continents (Crystal, 2003, p.29). In the 1800s,
Britain, with its innovations from the industrial revolution and other scientific innovations,
had become “the workshop of the world” (Crystal, 2003, p.80). As a result, new words and
expressions started to fill the English language, expanding the English language dramatically.
For that reason, people began to learn English more extensively, because they wanted to
benefit and know more about the innovations from Great Britain (Crystal, 2003, p.80).

Over time, the British Empire, together with other European countries, saw its influence and
power diminished when a new country grew stronger. From the late nineteenth century, the
US has asserted its powers and influence all over the world, mainly due to its rapid industrial
growth and leading role in technology and invention. American business started to grow on a
global scale with several big corporations and organizations that influenced markets all over
the world. When the need for progress in education and science grew internationally, English
became the obvious common language in intellectual and research environments (Crystal,
When new technologies for mass communication, such as radio and television were introduced, American culture and influence spread even faster than ever before. And media overall has had a huge impact on the growth of English as an international language (Crystal, 2003, p.98). The English language is the most dominant language for international contacts, whether it is in business, education, culture or politics, and more and more students all over the world get their education in English. The English language is nowadays part of the basic skills, and is no longer seen as a foreign language, but a subject that is self-evident for international studies. Graddol (2006) therefore believes that “This is bringing about profound changes in who is learning English, their motives for learning it and their needs as learners” (p.72).

One common and somewhat simplified view of world-English is to divide it into Kachru’s three circles. Firstly, there is an Inner circle which contains countries where English is a first language like America and Australia. The second circle is called the Outer circle, which includes multilingual countries and countries where English is a second language. One example of a country within the Outer circle is India. The third circle is called the Expanding circle; here English is seen as a foreign language. Some countries included here are China and Japan (Sharifian, 2009, p.3). This model shows the globalisation of English and that people have been migrating all over the world, which has resulted in spreading the Outer- and Expanding-Circle Engishes into the Inner-Circle countries. One interesting fact is that some academics refer to “world Englishes” as part of the Outer circle, and not the other circles (Sharifian, 2009, p.3). Sweden is placed in the Expanding circle, because of the fact that Sweden is one of the countries that has studied and learned the language. In this study, all of Kachru’s circles are represented; even though more focus remain on the Inner and Outer circle.

In many parts of the world, the spread of the English language has made people dependent on language skills in order to work, in contacts with authorities, and to access healthcare:

The language has penetrated deeply into the international domains of political life, business, safety, communication, entertainment, the media and education. The convenience of having a lingua franca available to serve global human relations and needs has come to be appreciated by millions. (Crystal, 2003, p.30)
The English language needs to evolve and grow as a world language. There exists a complicated network among English-speaking people all over the planet (Sharifian, 2009, p.1). Languages do not exist by themselves; it is the people who fill it with meaning. This means that “Language exists only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed, on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails” (Crystal, 2003, p.7). English is used in so many different contexts and so many different cultures that even if English is not a native language, the language continues to develop organically, making it difficult to predict the future of English as a world language. In the future, the English language may be a mix of other languages, and perhaps we can see words that have been acquired from languages like Chinese etc. (Crystal, 2003, p.176).

Crystal (2003) believes that it is difficult to see any immediate threat to English as a world language, but language development takes place over a long period of time and other dominant languages have lost significance in history when major transformations have taken place (p.123). However, English has a firm grip globally as an international language and appears to grow in the future and there is no alternative language that could threaten its position right now. As Crystal (2003) points out “A week may be a long time in politics; but a century is a short time in linguistics. Speculating about the future of English as a world language, we need to pay careful attention to indications which seem to go against the general trend” (p.123). What may be a threat, according to some, is the development that English is going through in some regions, where new variations arise which is inevitable as no country and no region can say it owns the English language. This is an inescapable consequence of the English language global spread as a world language (Crystal, 2003, p.141-142).

2.3 The Teaching of Spoken Language and Accents

The aim in school today is to teach and prepare students for the English language as a world language. This also includes in which direction English, as a language, will develop. English is the native or official language in a large number of countries, connects many different cultures and is the dominant language of communication in the world. The ability to use English is necessary for studies, traveling in other countries and for social contacts of different kinds (Skolverket, 2011a, p. 1). Preparing students for English as an international
language is the most complex and hardest part of being a language teacher today. Since the English language is an important part of the student's future, both when it comes to the international labour market, but also by making the student feel comfortable using the language in everyday situations (Malmberg, 1985). Skolverket (2011c) believes that “Knowledge of English thus increases the individual’s opportunities to participate in different social and cultural contexts, as well as in international studies and working life” (p. 33, my translation).

The syllabus for English for upper secondary school in Sweden states that we should teach “spoken language, also with different social and dialect features”, and “social, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket, 2011b, p.55). This means that it is necessary for teachers of English to prepare students for different types of Englishes. However, the English syllabus does not mention which accents should be taught. Matsuda (2012, p.6) claims how teachers express the difficulty with preparing students for English as an international language, because their “practices” is not enough. Furthermore, the teachers have not been given any ideas or suggestions on how one could or should begin to implement changes. The result of this is that teachers on an international level continue doing what they have been doing, and on that note stopped developing (Matsuda, 2012, p.6). Yet, the British linguist David Graddol (2006, p.84) believes that over the last years the pedagogical methods have had some improvements in learning English. Both the fields of English Language Teaching (ELT) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are under development and the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) is developing into a more coherent model for foreign language teaching to meet the needs that are required in this diverse world where English is being taught and used. One trend in the curriculum is an educational model called Europe Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) where different subjects as for example science and English are taught together – this means studying English through specialist content (Graddol, 2006, p.86).

In 2011 The Swedish School Inspectorate Report showed differences in the quality of education even within the same school. This is worrying as it gives the students different prospects (Skolinspektionen, 2011:7). As the English language has evolved and transformed over time in an international context, the English language today requires a completely different approach than to teach some other language, “since the international English does
not have a standard, but rather has a range of linguistic and rhetoric variations” (Sharifian, 2009, p.170). Teachers need to keep up with language change and are therefore required to read a great deal and particularly in their area of expertise. Students should also be encouraged to do the same and note useful vocabulary and expressions (Mattison, 2012, p.125).

Rindal (2013) has carried out a similar study to this one with Norwegian students, where they analysed students’ and their teachers’ pronunciation. Moreover, they studied phonological variables. A total of 70 people participated and the result showed that General American is favoured as an accent among Norwegian learners of English. These were some of the results:

The speakers are mostly rhotic (82%), they tap or voice Intervocalic /t/ (75%), use [æ] for BATH (68%), [ɑ] for LOT (56%), and have a back onset for GOAT (81%). One exception to this pattern is Post-coronal /ʃ/, which is present in 77 per cent of all tokens. (Rindal, 2013)

However, even if American English was preferred, the variation in each variable was extensive. The result for what accent the participants aimed for was 23 students for British accent, 29 students for American accent, 10 students for neutral accent, 0 students for Norwegian accent, 2 students for other accent and 3 students answered that they did not care (Rindal, 2013).

Ur (2012) explains that we need to teach our students to speak “fluently and correctly so that they can get their message across effectively” (p.1). However, there will be some occasions where teachers will overlook accuracy and instead focus on the message at hand. If students learn the correct grammar and pronunciation misunderstandings are not going to happen, yet incorrectness do not make people misunderstand that much either. Still, Ur (2012, p.2) argues that it could affect the ease of the conversation. Mistakes in grammar and pronunciation could end with a touch of awkwardness. Nevertheless, it is important that students can use their English in both informal and formal contexts as well as know some of the different varieties of English (Ur, 2012, p.2). The former generation of English teachers had to choose which of the dominant accents to work with, British or American English? Today, however, this question is not suitable or significant anymore. Ur (2012) thinks the question we need to ask
is “which lexical, grammatical, phonological or orthographical (spelling) forms are most likely to be understood and used worldwide?” (p.4).

Ur (2012, p.63) also mentions the different ways of teaching spoken English. Vocabulary is a basic steppingstone in order to learn a language. Students need to learn many words in order to understand, for example a text (Ur, 2012, p.63). The most important part of teaching vocabulary is that students need to learn words that are beneficial for their own use (Ur, 2012, p.65). Furthermore, the same conclusion is shared with listening exercises. Listening exercises should be authentic. Listening to people talking in a natural way is the best way of working with these kinds of exercises (Ur, 2012, p.102). Also, we need to take different accents into account (Ur, 2012, p.105), because of how the English language has developed over the years.

The English teachers need to work hard on getting their students to speak English to prevent them from falling back on their first language. It is difficult to get every student in a classroom to express him or herself orally. There are often problems such as shyness or trying to find things to say. It is important to try to talk as much English as possible in the classroom, so students get the habit of speaking English (Ur, 2012, p.118). Pronunciation is also an important aspect of learning to speak English. It is crucial that students learn to speak clearly. They need to be understood, otherwise “mispronunciations in international English conversations can actually bring about a breakdown in communication” (Ur, 2012, p.128).

2.4 Assessing Spoken Language

In the knowledge requirements of the English 5 syllabus for upper secondary school, accents are not mentioned. Teachers should not assess students’ accents. The only part of spoken language they should assess is that students understand the main content and basic details of oral English and that they can express themselves relatively clearly (Skolverket, 2011b). There are three English courses in upper secondary school; the aforementioned English 5, English 6 and English 7. In the English 6 syllabus, it states that students should be able to speak in a “relatively rapid pace” (Skolverket, 2011b), and in the most advanced course students should know the implied meaning of spoken language and with certainty express themselves.
When assessing spoken language we both have problems that are practical and problems with reliability. The problems concerning the practical aspect are often referred to time. It often takes time to examine a whole class. Spoken language is generally examined by interaction whether it is individually, in pairs or in groups. The problem with reliability is about the vagueness. It is not possible to grade speech objectively, nor is it possible to use something computer-based. There is no “right” method to assess spoken English. Assessing students’ speech is difficult due to the fact that teachers cannot remember all of each student’s conversations. Teachers can, however, record every student’s oral exam, so it could be listened to again. This takes even more time though. It is important that teachers have some kind of help assessing spoken language. It might help to use standards or some form of scale when grading an oral exam. This could help the reliability problem, but it is important to make the criteria for the grades clear (Ur, 2012, p.180).

There are different types of exercises teachers can use in order to test students’ speaking abilities. One of the more popular exercises is interviews, often made in pairs, and interviews often relate to everyday life which makes it authentic and relevant for students (Ur, 2012, p.180). Another exercise teachers can test is picture description; it makes students describe what a picture contains. This is a rather easy exercise, which makes it good for beginners of English. Yet another way is to let students make presentations, and then the students can rehearse their speech and practice it. However, presentations are not as spontaneous as interviews. Interviews are more relevant to students because of the fact that in real life one does not practice a conversation before having it. One exercise that is more authentic than presentations, and which saves time are group discussions. Discussions make it easy for teachers in the sense that they can listen to more than one person at the same time. The negative aspect of discussions is that each student does not have the opportunity to talk as much as the other. It can be a very unfair exercise if one does not act as a leader, and supervise the group, letting every student be heard (Ur, 2012, p.181).

In section 2.2 Kachru’s three circles are mentioned, both the inner, outer and expanding circles. In the expanding and the outer circle English has undergone “nativization” (Lowenberg, 2012, p.85), which means the language has changed and has become local. It has changed in style, syntax, phonology and so on. It is important to be aware of these distinctions when assessing proficiency and, in particular, the deficiencies that could be made by learners of a second language (Lowenberg, 2012, p.94). Lowenberg (2012) argues that the best way of
testing Standard English is by paying attention to “domains, contexts and situations in which students will actually be using English” (p.98). As the Danish professor Bent Preisler (1993, p. 18) writes on the importance of assessing language in a broader context, because of the fact that there is considerable vocabulary differences in many different areas, such as education, politics, trade and business.

3. Material and Methods

The method used in this project was a questionnaire (Appendix). The questionnaire was created through Google Forms and was therefore sent out electronically. The point with this questionnaire was to reach as many teachers as possible in the short amount of time given for this project. By using a questionnaire it was possible to reach more people and it also allowed the respondents to be anonymous (Björkdahl Ordell, 2007, p.85). A questionnaire also makes it easier to see the differences among the participants (Björkdahl Ordell, 2007, p.85).

3.1 Selection

My focus in this study is English teachers in upper secondary school and a selection was randomly made from a list of Swedish upper secondary schools. Twenty-six schools were selected all over Sweden. My questionnaire was sent out both to schools in large cities such as Stockholm and Gothenburg, and to schools in smaller towns such as Linköping, Umeå and Katrineholm. More importantly, this selection was to make it possible for English teachers all over Sweden to have the opportunity to answer this questionnaire. This is a relatively small study, and therefore it is not possible to draw far-reaching conclusions from the results, but it can give an indication on how oral teaching is conducted in Swedish upper secondary school. Larger surveys need to be done to produce a complete statistical basis. Overall, 29 English teachers participated in this study 20 of them were females, 8 were males and 1 was non-binary. Among these 29 teachers there was a wide spread of experience 4 people had 1–4 years’ experience, 7 people had 5–10 years’ experience, 3 people had 11–15 years’ experience, 8 people had 16–20 years’ experience and lastly 7 people had 21 years or more.
3.2 Ethical Considerations

Vetenskapsrådet’s research ethics have been followed in this study (Vetenskapsrådet, 2014). All of the requirements have been taken into consideration and they are confidentiality, consent, information and the requirement of usefulness. Firstly, the participation was voluntary. The information about when and where the result is going to be published was given to the participants. The participants also needed to give their consent in order to partake in the study and they gave their consent when they finished answering the questionnaire. Moreover, this study was confidential; people who participated in this study are not going to be recognized by others. Lastly, this study has only been used for research purposes.

3.3 Validity and Reliability

Firstly, this study is based on a questionnaire which made it easier to reach English teachers in different cities all over Sweden and secondly, it was more time sufficient. There is however a weakness with questionnaires in general which is that teachers could interpret the same question differently. It is therefore important that the questions within a questionnaire have good reliability. The questions in this study were thoroughly processed. The questionnaire sent out was the same to all participating teachers, but since the participants were anonymous, it is difficult to indicate which of the schools answered the questionnaire. However, the graphical spread of teachers and schools selected for the study was important, and even if it was hard to indicate which of the schools have partaken in this study, both larger and smaller towns were represented. The questionnaire was consistent because the respondents’ answers were in many ways similar to one another, and therefore the reliability was high.

Secondly, to discuss validity the question here to be answered was if the one thing that was going to be measured was in fact measured? (Karlsson, 2007, p.250). In my belief it was. The questions asked in the questionnaire were based on the aims of this study, even though there was one problem with one of the questions. One question may have been misinterpreted in this study, and that was the question about assessing spoken language; *Are students’ grades affected by the accent they speak? Yes/ No/ Sometimes*, where one teacher’s answer indicates that she may have misunderstood the question. The teacher replied that students’ grades would be affected by the accent they speak, if the accent is too much influenced by their
mother tongue. This is of course correct; however, that was not the intention. Here it would have been good to be more specific and written English accents, so the respondents could exclude the influence of the mother tongue. Besides this question, there is no indication that any other question has been misunderstood.

As mentioned above, it was hard to know which teachers from which schools answered this questionnaire. Nonetheless, this questionnaire was sent out to 26 schools and I was well aware that some of the participants may did not respond to my questionnaire. Nevertheless, to strengthen the validity, a date for submission was put on the questionnaire, so the teachers knew when the deadline was (Björkdahl Ordell, 2007, p.89). If some other method was to be chosen, like for an example interviews, it would have taken a lot of time to reach 29 teachers. Although this is a fairly limited group, it would have been difficult to interview as many participants and henceforth this study would not have had the same external validity. Questionnaires make it possible to get a better external validity than some other method (Karlsson, 2007, p.252).

To conclude, this study had higher reliability than validity. There were some problems with how one question was conveyed, and how the selection of upper secondary schools was handled. Still, the method was suitable for this study and all the other questions were thoroughly processed.

4. Results

In this section, the results are presented. The structure of the presentation of the results follows the same order as the questionnaire (Appendix). The results are presented in sub-sections with both text and figures of the teachers’ answers.

4.1 Introducing Accents

Firstly, when it comes to whether the respondents introduce different kinds of accents from the English-speaking world in their class, it turned out that almost all of the respondents did. As can be seen in Figure 1, only one of them claimed not to do so.
Secondly, what English accents students get acquainted with in upper secondary schools are to be discussed. Not surprisingly, Figure 2 shows that British accents and American accent were introduced by all the respondents who worked with accents in class (28). However, Australian accent (24) and Indian accent (21) also turned out to be introduced to most of the students.

There were six people who answered ‘other accent’ in this question; two of them referred to Jamaican accent, one to Liberian, one to New Zealand, one unspecific and one answered that it depends on what material is available, daily news and so on.
4.2 Working with Accents

The next question was more specific and stated if teachers worked with English accents in their class. As seen in Figure three, most teachers (22) work with accents in their class, but there are also several teachers (7) that do not work with accents, just introduce them. To explain the meaning of introducing versus working with accents in the classroom, teachers who introduce accents only mention accents on a few occasions. However, teachers who work with accents in the classroom have exercises students explicitly work with and for a longer period of time.

Figure 3, Working with accents in class.

Question 4b was an open question about why they work with accents, and there were 20 teachers who answered. Nine teachers replied that it is not optional. The English syllabus states that teachers should work with English-speaking countries and “spoken language, also with social and dialect features” (Skolverket, 2011b). Four teachers explained that it was because of the syllabus, and five teachers because of the fact that we have different varieties of English. Four teachers answered that students think it is fun and interesting. Four other teachers answered that it is an important part of understanding English as well as producing it. Another teacher responded that it was obvious because of the fact that people speak differently. One teacher thoroughly explained why she works with accents:

Because there is so much focus on being "perfect" and having the perfect pronunciation that it makes me sick. The most important thing is that the students have the guts and the will to actually just talk! It should not be relevant which accent they have - English is for everybody. (Female, 0-4 years of experience)
This comment shows how students today are not comfortable to talk in front of their class, and that it could be hard to get some students to talk English at all. In that case, trying to get them to speak is a more central part to work with than to specifically work with accents.

4.3 Ways to Work with Accents

Figure four shows in what ways teachers work with spoken language and, in particular, accents. Here, it is obvious that many teachers use listening tasks (25) when working with accents. In second place is vocabulary tasks (13), and in third place discussion tasks (11).

![Bar chart](chart.png)

**Figure 4, In what ways teachers work with spoken language and accents.**

In question 4d, the respondents were asked what they thought was the best way of working with accents and 23 of them answered. All (23) chose listening in one way or another to be the best way to work with accents. Moreover, some of them presented different examples of listening tasks such as films or documentaries (6). Apart from listening tasks, some teachers also mentioned discussion tasks (3), reading fiction (1), and imitation (1) as the best ways of working with accents.

4.4 Not Working with Accents

Question 4e examined why teachers do not work with accents, and three teachers answered. One teacher answered that it was not really important. Another teacher wrote that they do not
work with accents “as a task as such but in listening exercises in general” (Female, 16–20 years of experience). The third teacher answered that they do get acquainted with different varieties of English, but that it is not something they work in depth with. “It is more important that they get more basic skills like reading, writing, listening, and vocabulary. There is not enough time” (Non-binary, 16–20 years of experience).

4.5 Choosing Accents to Work With

The result also shows that more than half of the teachers (16) make an active choice and decide what accents they are going to work with in their class. There are, however, many teachers (10) that do not decide which accents to work with. Question 5b shows how teachers choose which accents to work with, and 15 teachers answered this question. Six teachers answered that they choose the most common ones to work with. Four teachers wrote that it all depends on what educational material they can find. Three other teachers want to mix accents and work with them as much as possible, and that students also can find examples of accents to work with. One teacher replied that it depends on discussion topics. The last teacher answered that she does not want to work with English from just the cool countries like America for example.

Most teachers chose which accents to work with, but some students can choose accents on their own. About half of the teachers (15), in this study, do not let students choose accents for themselves. It was very evenly divided, but still only 14 teachers said that they let students choose accents for themselves, as seen in Figure 5.

![Figure 5, Students who can choose accents for themselves.](image-url)
Teachers, who answered that they let students choose accents for themselves (14), were also asked which accents the students choose to listen to. In Figure 6, it is clear that most students choose the American accent (red bar), closely followed by British accents (blue bar). In this figure the x-axis stands for most common (1) and least common accent (5) students’ choose to work with. The y-axis stands for the number of participants that chose American accents and so forth.

![Figure 6, Which accents students’ choose to work with.](chart)

One teacher chose to answer ‘other’ on question 6b. The accent that the teacher was referring to as other was “Chinese immigrant” English.

### 4.6 Preferred Accents

To continue, Figure 7 shows which accents these English teachers like the best. This figure illustrate that British accents (blue bar) were preferred. In second place came American accent (red bar) and close by came Irish accent (green bar). The x-axis stands for most preferred (1) and least preferred (5). The y-axis stands for the number of participants who picked each accent.
There were four teachers who answered ‘other accent’ in Figure seven. The accents they were referring to as ‘other’ were Central African and Jamaican. One teacher replied “no preferences” (Non-binary, 16-20 years of experience).

4.7 Aiming for Accents

Most of the teachers that participated in this questionnaire aim for a particular accent (Figure 8). Twenty-one of the teachers aim to speak an English accent, whereas eight teachers do not.
As seen in Figure 9, the teachers aim for British accents (11) and American accent (9). Two teachers chose Canadian accent and “World English” accent.

4.8 Important Accents for Students to Learn

Teachers think the most important English accents for students to learn in today’s society are American and British English. Needless to say, Figure 10 shows that British accents, which is the blue bar, (14) and American accent, which is the red bar, (14) are the most important accents. However, Australian accent, the orange bar (13), is also one of the accents that many teachers think is important. The x-axis in this figure show the most important (1) and the least important (5) accents for students to learn. The y-axis shows the number of participants that have answered.
Three teachers answered ‘other accent’, which meant that they thought another English accent was more important to learn than the other alternatives. However, one teacher did not think it was important to learn accents. She explained her answer thoroughly:

I don't think it is important at all! The most important thing is that they dare to talk! If I teach "correct pronunciation" of a particular accent, students might be afraid of talking. They are already quite limited because they are afraid of making mistakes. (Female, 0–4 years of experience)

This teacher did not choose a top five list of English accents due to the fact that she does not work with English accents. Another teacher replied:

I have students from many different backgrounds. In my point of view one should not teach a specific variety of spoken English like they did in the past. English is a world language and should be influenced by all people that speak English. (Non-binary, 16–20 years of experience)

This answer was similar to the previous one. And finally, the third teacher who picked the alternative ‘other’ thought that an accent from an English speaking country of Africa would have been important for students to learn.
4.9 Dominant Accents – British and American English

The next figure illustrates if teachers think British and American English are still the dominant accents in Swedish school, as they were in the late nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Figure 11 shows that almost all teachers (28) think British and American English are the dominant accents in Swedish school today.

Figure 11, Teachers who think British and American English are still the dominant accents in Swedish school.

4.10 Students Aiming for Accents

Teachers were also asked if they have students aiming for a specific accent, and 19 teachers answered yes (Figure 12). They do have students that want to speak a specific accent. However, ten teachers answered no, that they do not have students that are aiming for an English accent.

Figure 12, Students that are aiming for a specific accent.
To show which accents students aim for, Figure 13 illustrates that teachers believe most students aim to speak American accent (13). Not far behind are students that aim to speak British accents (10). In third place are accents like Australian accent (3) and Irish accent (3). The x-axis represents the most common (1) and the least common (5) accents students are aiming for.

Two teachers answered ‘other accent’. The first teacher’s response was “I’ve never encountered any other accents than the aforementioned” (Male, 11–15 years of experience). The other teacher wrote: “I chose other on number 3–5 because those of my students who are aiming for an accent actually only aim for either British or American accent” (Female, 5–10 years of experience). This teacher only has students that are aiming for British or American English, no other accent.

Teachers were also asked how many students they estimate aim for a specific accent. Teachers think a very small percentage of their students actually aim for a specific accent. Eight teachers only think 0–14 % of their students aim for an accent. Five teachers think 15–30 % of their students aim for an accent, but that is still less than half of their students. So, this result shows that most teachers do not think their students aim for a specific English accent (Figure 14).
Figure 14, How many students teachers estimate aim for a specific accent.

4.11 Grades Affected by the Accent Students Speak

Another question that was asked to the teachers was if students’ grades are affected by the accent they speak. Practically all teachers (26), in this questionnaire, do not let students’ grades be affected by which English accent they speak. Figure 15 shows this, and also that only one teacher answered yes to this question.

When it comes to the way in which students’ accents influence their grades, there were four responses, even though only one teacher answered that students’ grades are affected. Three other teachers wanted to make a comment. The first teacher’s answer was about authenticity, that they use a vocabulary closely associated with that specific accent. The second teacher said that it needs to be understandable and coherent. In the third response the teacher wrote
that they can speak as they like as long as they live up to the requirements needed for a specific grade. Lastly, the fourth teacher who answered the question replied that students’ accents will be influenced by their grades, in case they speak with an accent too much influenced by their mother tongue. This will make it difficult to actually understand what they say. Unfortunately the last teacher misunderstood the question, which is referred to in the section of Validity and Reliability.

4.12 Final Comments

The last question was to see if the teachers had any final comments, and four teachers replied. The first teacher recommended Irvine Welsh’s novel, called *Trainspotting*. This novel is according to this teacher, “a brilliant educational tool when it comes to accents” (Male, 11–15 years of experience). The second teacher “truly hopes this survey shows that teachers are not aiming for a perfect pronunciation of a particular accent in the classroom” (Female, 0–4 years of experience). The third teacher’s final comment was:

I do not think the American accent is important to teach in school because that is the accent students learn constantly in their spare time. Considering the limited amount of lessons at your disposal, letting the students be acquainted with other accents is more important. (Female, more than 21 years of experience)

The final comment from the last teacher answering this question was to remember what is important. According to her, it is important to expose them to different accents and it is entirely up to them to decide what accent they want to use themselves.

5. Discussion

The results show that 28 out of 29 of the respondents introduce different kinds of English accents in their classrooms, but the explanations of how and why they work with accents are many. The most frequently introduced accents in the Swedish classrooms were American accent, British accents and Australian accent. These accents are from countries where English is their primary language (Sharifian, 2009). This also shows that British and American
English still are dominant in school today, when 28 out of 29 respondents thought so in this study. However, not all teachers work with accents in their classrooms. The results show that 22 out of 29 respondents work with accents, even if more teachers introduce English accents. The most popular ways of working with accents are by listening and vocabulary tasks, which is in line with Ur (2012, p.63 & 102), who claims vocabulary and listening tasks are basic steppingstones when learning accents and pronunciation overall.

Furthermore, 26 out of 29 respondents said that students’ grades are not affected by the accent they speak, which is in accordance with the syllabus for English. Some teachers replied that what accent the students use can affect the grade they receive, and that their pronunciation should be authentic. Accents should be comprehensible and clear, and another teacher response was that their accent should not be influenced too much by their mother tongue. Two of these answers have some alignment with the knowledge requirements, because when assessing spoken language the language should be clear and understandable. Students should also be able to develop correctness in their use of language in speech, which means that their accent cannot be too heavily influenced by Swedish or other mother tongues (Skolverket, 2011b). This emphasizes the importance of good and comprehensive teaching and training in oral English proficiency. The National Agency for Education’s goal of getting the students to communicate with as little mother tongue accent as possible must not stand in the way of encouraging the students to communicate without taking too much account of form. Because “True communication means making the text optimally suitable, in terms of form as well as content, for its specific purpose and audience” (Preisler, 1993, p.18). Many people can have phonemes from both American and British English in their speech for example. This, however, may not be easy for other speakers of English to understand. It is therefore important that teachers prepare students for as many accents as possible so they can, in the future, comprehend different people.

These results were quite similar to the results of Rindal’s (2013) study. In this questionnaire, 19 out of 29 respondents thought that students aim for a specific accent, and like Rindal’s study most students aim for an American accent. In second place came British accents and in third place came Irish and Australian accent. It is fair to say that American accent is still the most popular accent to speak. Many English teachers in Sweden do not think most students aim for an accent. Most teachers thought that 0-30% of all students aim for a particular
accent, which is less than the Norwegian students (Rindal, 2013). However, this study was made on teachers and their perception, not the students themselves.

From the students’ perspective, there is an advantage to learn American English, both when it comes to the students’ preferences and of actual use. American English is the variety they both prefer and the variety they use. This is in line with previous studies done by Modiano and Söderlund (2002) where they found a clear preference for American English among upper secondary school students, and a shift from a study done in 1999 where British English was still the preferred variety (Modiano & Söderlund, 2002, p.149). However, most of the students probably mix varieties more than they think and this mixing mirrors how English is used in Sweden. Another study like this which was conducted in 2000 showed that “as many as 69% of the students mix features from the two varieties” (Axelsson, 2002, p.137). We can therefore assume that these assumptions from both my study and that of Axelsson are relevant to Swedish students’ attitudes towards English teachings.

6. Conclusion

In this study, there are some differences in how the respondents approach different English accents. According to the results, most of the respondents work with accents and pronunciation to some extent. Most of the respondents have thought about accents and incorporated them into the curriculum, while a minority think that doing so is unnecessary or that there is a lack of time or resources in the schedule to explore the varieties of English. We can conclude that most of the teachers who answered the questionnaire stated that they work with accents in their classrooms. Moreover, other studies reveal that most teachers traditionally think that British or American accent and pronunciation are the most important ones to master. Other forms of world Englishes still lag behind, most likely due to the fact that it is fairly recent we discovered the need to learn different Englishes. The result of this has shown that Englishes from different continents around the world has been acknowledged. According to this study, the respondents stated that the best way to learn different pronunciations and accents was by listening tasks closely followed by vocabulary tasks; this is in line with the established practice. How much focus each teacher puts into this seems to vary between different teachers and different schools. This is something that needs further
investigation because it is important to prepare our students for an interconnected global world. Nevertheless, it is not as important as it used to be to master the correct accent and pronunciation of a particular accent. The respondents also acknowledged that students like to explore different Englishes because it is fun and that it makes them more dedicated to learn English.

Another conclusion we can draw from this study is that most of the respondents make an active choice and decide what accent they are going to work with. The respondents mostly work with accents such as British and American English or the ones incorporated in the educational material. It is also clear that among the respondents the preferred accent and pronunciation is still British accent, which is in line with other studies made on the subject. Most of the respondents in Sweden talk in a British accent as well (8b). If we look at the importance of English accents there is a clear emphasis on British and American accents. In third place, Australian accent is the respondents’ choice over other English varieties, probably because of the fact that it is a popular travel and work destination for young Swedes (9). Nevertheless, in this study we can make the conclusion that British and American English still is dominant in Swedish schools, just as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century (Bratt, 1984, p.13).

It is clear that teachers think that American English is the most popular accent among their Swedish students, and the accent a majority of the students aim for. This is in line with other studies and proof of the American influence in culture, trade and travel. Mobärg (1997) states that “Preference for and exposure to American popular culture does make a difference to the English-language attitudes of Swedish school students” (p.216). Besides, teachers in this study state that which accent their students prefer or aim for does not affect their grades. This is the most important conclusion because of the fact that teachers should not assess students’ accents. Lastly, to quote one of the respondents who gave her view of how English as a subject should be seen: “The most important thing is that the students have the guts and the will to actually just talk! It should not be relevant which accent they have - English is for everybody” (Female, 0–4 years of experience).

I conclude with the hope that more and larger studies will be done in the area. Several international studies have been made over the years, but I find that there is no holistic approach to getting a coherent basis for improving and developing English teaching in the
Swedish school. It would be interesting to do a larger study on this subject, to make real-life interviews with teachers about the multitude of English accents. It is clear that teachers have different perceptions and experiences about world English and how to approach accents in the classroom. Moreover, it would be interesting to know more about how teachers feel about assessing spoken language, in order to see how the teaching of spoken English can fulfil the National Agency for Educations goal of equal education for all students.
References:


Ur, P. (2012). *A Course in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.


Appendix

The Questionnaire:

1. How many years have you been working as an English teacher? 0 - 4 years, 5-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, 21 years or longer.

2. Gender: Man, Woman, Non-binary.

3a. Do you introduce different kinds of accents from the English-speaking world? Yes / No

3b. If yes, what accents do students get acquainted with? British accents, American accent, Irish accent, Scottish accent, Canadian accent, Australian accent, South African accent, Indian accent + other__________.

4a. Do you work with accents in your class? Yes/No

4b. If yes, why have you chosen to work with accents?

4c. If yes, in what ways do you work with spoken language and the multitude of accents of the English-speaking world? Listening tasks, Vocabulary, Pronunciation tasks, Discussions, Reading tasks, Writing tasks + other__________ (They can tick multiple boxes)

4d. If yes, what do you think is the best way of working with accents?

4e. If no, why have you chosen not to work with accents?

5a. Do you make an active choice and decide what accents you are going to work with in your class? Yes/No/ No I don’t work with accents

5b. If yes, how do you choose which accents to work with?

6a. Can students choose accents for themselves in your class? Yes/No
6b. If yes, which accents do they choose/listen to? Please choose the five most common accents. 1=the most common, 2=the second most common, 3=the third most common, 4=the fourth most common, 5 = the fifth most common. **British accents, American accent, Irish accent, Scottish accent, Canadian accent, Australian accent, South African accent, Indian accent + other.**

7. Which accent/accents do you like best? Please choose your top 5. 1= the favourite, 2= the second favourite, 3= the third favourite, 4= the fourth favourite, 5= the fifth favourite. **British accents, American accent, Irish accent, Scottish accent, Canadian accent, Australian accent, South African accent, Indian accent + other_________.**

8a. Do you yourself aim to speak a particular accent? **Yes/No**

8b. If yes, what English accent do you aim for? **British accents, American accent, Irish accent, Scottish accent, Canadian accent, Australian accent, South African accent, Indian accent + other_________.**

9. Which accents do you think are most important for students to learn in today’s society? Please choose your top 5. 1=the most important, 2=the second most important, 3=the third most important, 4=the fourth most important, 5 = the fifth most important. **British accents, American accent, Irish accent, Scottish accent, Canadian accent, Australian accent, South African accent, Indian accent + other_________.**

10. English became a mandatory subject in the middle of the nineteenth century. Back then, British and American English were the only acceptable accents in Sweden. Do you think British and American English are still the dominant accents in Swedish school today?

11a. Do you have students that are aiming for a specific accent? **Yes/No**

11b. If yes, which accents do they aim for? Please choose the five most common accents. 1=the most common, 2=the second most common, 3=the third most common, 4=the fourth most common, 5 = the fifth most common. **British accents, American accent, Irish accent,
Scottish accent, Canadian accent, Australian accent, South African accent, Indian accent + other__________.

11c. If yes, how many of your students do you estimate aim for a specific accent? 0-14 % 15 – 30 % 31 – 45% 46-60% 61-75% 76% or more

11d. Are students’ grades affected by the accent they speak? Yes/ No/ Sometimes

11e. If yes or sometimes, in what way does their accent influence their grades?

12. Do you have any final comments?