The Introduction of English at the Junior Level of the Swedish Comprehensive Compulsory 9-Year School
A study of perceived knowledge in relation to motivation conducted among 3rd grade students

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Abstract

This paper focuses on perceived knowledge of students at the junior level of the comprehensive compulsory 9-year school, as this has an impact on their motivation to study the language. The national curriculum of 2011 assumes that English is introduced at an early stage, during the junior level. The purpose of this paper is to examine how students who start English in the first grade, according to the recommendations of the curriculum, relate to the subject. The paper contains a bibliography section, where I present language research concerning foreign language introduction, language acquisition and motivation, followed by a presentation of a historical view on second language learning in Sweden, and then an investigation conducted by a questionnaire. The purpose of the investigation is to measure the students’ perceived knowledge of English, as this affects their motivation. The investigation is limited to two third grade classes in a junior level school in a rural, scarcely populated municipality in the south-west of Sweden. All in all 40 students took part in the study. The aim of the paper is to answer the following question: How do the pupils regard their own achievements in English?

The students have a general ability to evaluate their personal achievements and knowledge subjectively. They seem quite confident about their listening and speaking skills. The most difficult language segment, writing, where the language skills and requirements are most clearly defined, is the language area where the students feel that their ability is weaker. All students, with one exception, agree that language studies are important for them. What the study also shows is the variety of languages that students wish to study, i.e. Chinese and Japanese together with Spanish, Greek and sign languages. The reason why this investigation has been conducted is to investigate the students’ perceived knowledge as this has an impact on their motivation to study the language.

Nyckelord: Early English introduction, English at the junior level, perceived knowledge, motivation.
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1. Introduction

English is a worldwide language, used as a first language by about 330 million people, and as an official language in several countries with a different mother tongue. These countries, where English is used together with the native language, are referred to as the outer circle. This circle embraces a large number of countries where English has the formal position of a second language, especially in former British colonies (Svartvik 2001:9-10). Anyone is bound to encounter English almost in every field of society, ranging from culture to science, through different media or from tourists. English is a lingua franca, a language which is used for communication between groups of people who speak different languages but which is not used between members of the same group (Cambridge Online Dictionary).

What I wish to examine in this work is how pupils exposed to early introduction of English (in the 1st grade) view their knowledge after two years of studying it. The reason why I want to do so is that their perception of what they have learnt tends to affect their motivation to study further, which, in turn, tends to have a decisive impact on the language course efficiency.

1.1 Aims

The purpose of this investigation is to get an idea of how the students view their own achievements in English, as their motivation is affected by their perceived knowledge of English.

Question:

How do the pupils regard their own achievements in English?
2. Background

The purpose of this section is to explain the magnitude of English as a lingua franca, and to investigate what research says about children’s learning of English (hereafter referred to as L2), and motivation in relation to language studies. Furthermore, I will present a historical view on foreign language studies in Sweden, and how English became our first foreign language.

2.1 The importance of English today

As English is considered a lingua franca these days, it is being taught to children around the world. This bridging language, which is being used and understood to at least some degree by billions of people around the world, helps people with different mother tongues to communicate. The native language in Sweden is Swedish and English is the compulsory L2 learned in Swedish schools.

According to Svartvik (2001:10) the population of the world will, to a large extent, become bilingual. More and more people are L2 learners and English is one of the most commonly used languages throughout the world today. Chinese is spoken by roughly twice the number of people compared to English, but English is a more important contact language. It can be said to be the global village language today, only because it happened to be there when there was a need for it (Svartvik 2001:9).

Here are some facts about the spread of global English, which show how English affects people around the world:

“English is used in more than 70 countries as an official or semiofficial language, and has a high status in further 20 countries.

20 per cent of the Earth’s population has some knowledge of English. And the demand for more English knowledge is constantly rising

More than two out of three scientists use the English language for studies in their particular fields of interest.
The major part of all electronically stored information around the world is in English.

English is the essential language for books, magazines, newspapers, airports, sea transports, international business, conferences, diplomacy, tourism, international contests, film, TV, popular music, advertising and information technology.”

(Own translation from Svartvik 2001:8)

2.2 The language learning in children - International and Swedish research and theories

This section focuses on children’s language learning and when foreign language studies should be introduced to children. The question if the foreign language can be introduced before the mother tongue is firmly set is debatable, but the Swedish curriculum of 2011 lists the core contents of English that should be achieved during the first three years (Lgr 11:31), which in turn means that schools are supposed to introduce English some time during the junior level.

When infants and young children learn to use a language it happens quickly and naturally. Already by the age of six children will have learnt the basis of the mother tongue (Hedström, 2001). This process is automatic, but the children do not develop their skills without a suitable and stimulating language environment. In order to acquire a language and sound like a natural speaker it is a great help when one grows up in an environment where the language is spoken regularly. If the children are 5-10 years old when they are moved from their natural lingual habitat they will easily adapt to a foreign language. If the parents continue to speak in their native tongue, their children will be bilingual (Hedström, 2001).

In our lives there is a period when our ability to learn languages decreases. Lenneberg (1967) refers to this as critical period, when our language learning ability becomes weaker. This happens gradually, mainly after the adolescent period. According to different researchers in the field, this critical period
tends to vary. When it comes to pronunciation and phonetic sounds, this period occurs already when the children are about six years old, grammar and word acquisition come later (Svartvik, 1999). In other words, age and language learning are closely connected. The cognitive development depends on the child’s ability to use concrete or abstract thinking. Infants are dependent on something concrete to connect words and objects. This is also true for the early L2 learning, where the student needs concrete examples to lean back on (Bergström 2001:51).

The Swedish curricula Lgr 62 and Lgr 69 focused more on the form of the language than on the contents. The view was behavioristic in the sense that language should be learnt through drill and repetition, thereby eliminating grammar mistakes. Good language habits should be practiced over and over again, i.e. by learning language patterns through excessive drill, in order to achieve correct language usage (Eriksson & Tholin 1996:9).

Chomsky presented a well-founded criticism against the behavioristic view on language learning. He named this new view LAD, Language Acquisition Device, which mainly puts the focus on the child’s innate ability to learn languages through a “built-in” system in the human brain. Thus the brain, he says, is preprogrammed to learn language through a kind of universal grammar. (Eriksson & Tholin 1996:10).

Genesee (Genesee 1974:147) mentions the argument of affective purity, which suggests that young children are considered to be more efficient second language learners because of their lack of affective predispositions, which might interfere with their learning. The young children are regarded as more naïve and more willing to learn, whereas older students have had the chance to form attitudes which might come into conflict with the learning process.

The linguist Roger Brown’s studies in the 1960s concerning the learning of so-called basic morphemes supported an early foreign language introduction. He picked out 14 basic morphemes and investigated in which order they were mastered. In the 70s surveys about L2 learners (learning English as a second language) were conducted in order to compare L1 and L2 learners and their
acquisition of morphemes. The findings supported the theory about basic morphemes to a large extent, which might imply that there is a natural learning process, or a preprogrammed language acquisition ability, in correspondence with Chomsky’s earlier findings. (Eriksson & Tholin 1996:11).

Stephen Krashen is an American language researcher who has incorporated the LAD-theories on language learning into his own hypotheses. According to Krashen, a meaningful and understandable language is the most important factor when it comes to building up our language ability. If the contents are of personal concern to us and we acquire the meaning, we also unconsciously acquire the form of language. This process is sometimes referred to as language acquisition, and it is, according to Krashen, far more efficient to our language development than language learning, the conscious variety of learning. A steady flow of language just above the level of one’s ability is precisely what one needs in order to learn a language. In this sense there is no difference between L1 and L2 learners (Eriksson & Tholin 1996:11-12).

This language learning view is a part of the theoretical foundation for the communicative language teaching spread by the European Council during the 1970s and 80s. In communicative teaching the contents and functions of the language are central points of interest. The students read and listen for the content, and try to use the words and phrases in their own production of language. The purpose of their communication is, as much as possible, to express their own thoughts and ideas in interaction with others (Eriksson & Tholin:12).

2.2.1 The EPÅL-project

In Sweden the EPÅL-project (Engelska på lågstadiet), a wide, all-round survey conducted by Lars Holmstrand, aimed at investigating the advantages and disadvantages of early English introduction to Swedish Junior level pupils (Holmstrand 1983: 22).
The all-round survey involved a study of both long term and short term effects on English, as well as any positive or negative effects spreading to other subjects. It also implied a focus on the study of the effects on students from different social groups (Holmstrand 1983:24).

The EPÅL-project was one over a ten-year-period where the introduction of English took place in Grade 1, where the pupils were 7 years old. The study was initiated in 1970 and concluded in 1980. The aim of the project was to find out whether there were any positive or negative effects on the students with an early English start. There were both an experimental group and a control group, containing native Swedish children and immigrant children, as well as qualified teachers. The final report stated that there was nothing that indicated deterioration in students’ Swedish results because of an early English introduction. On the contrary, the pupils showed considerable Swedish language improvements (Sundin 2001:152).

Holmberg’s own conclusions, among others, were: The early English start does not interfere with the pupils’ acquisition of either Swedish or mathematics.

The project shows that it is not a disadvantage to let the children start studying English early, even in the first grade. Given the right conditions, especially when it comes to the access of qualified teachers, English might be introduced in the first or second grades. It is even pedagogically advisable and desirable in comparison to start in the grades 3 or 4. (Holmstrand 1983:93).

2.2.2 Other investigations about early language study starts

The Burstall report, published by Clare Burstall in 1974 and representing 10 years of foreign language studies evaluation, came to the conclusion that children who started studying a foreign language later reached just about the same language level as those who started earlier. The time and effort spent did not correspond with the amount of knowledge the children had acquired. Thus, it seemed
that an early start in a foreign language did not automatically mean that the children would acquire more foreign language knowledge than those who started learning later (Genesee 1978:149-150).

The American psychologist William Penfield claimed in a report in 1953 that children have a greater chance of acquiring a language before puberty, mainly focusing on intonation and pronunciation (Lindström 1998:11). Furthermore, the early beginners generally had a more positive attitude towards the foreign language they had studied than those who had started studying a foreign language at the age of 11. Lindström concludes her theoretical description of English as a second language in Swedish schools by saying that we do not know how children are affected by early starts of English and Swedish in grade 1.

2.3 Motivation

Motivation in second language learning is a complex phenomenon. The learners’ communicative needs and their attitudes towards the country or community where the language is spoken are of great significance to the motivation of learning a foreign language. If there is a need to speak in different situations the motivation rises (Lightbown & Spada 2006:63).

Zoltan Dörnyei has developed a process-oriented model of motivation that consists of three phases. This is a new dynamic view of motivation, with an emphasis to establish changes in motivation over time (Dörnyei 2001:19).

The initial phase, the so-called choice motivation, is the phase where the studies commence and the goals are established. The second phase, the executive motivation, refers to the carrying out of necessary tasks to maintain the level of motivation experienced from the start. The third and final phase, the motivation retrospection, indicates that students should react to their achievements (Dörnyei 2001:21). According to Dörnyei the way students regard their previous experiences in this phase will be of vital importance in determining the activities the students will be motivated to carry
on with. (Dörnyei 2001:21). Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation is, as Dörnyei describes it, a way to round off the learning experience. The students’ own interpretation of their achievements, not the actual level of success, is central to strengthen motivation (Dörnyei 2001:118).

In the classroom it is important that the content is made “interesting and relevant to their age and level of ability, the learning goals are challenging yet manageable and clear, and the atmosphere is supportive” (Lightbown & Spada 2006:64).

2.4 A historical view on Second Language Learning in Sweden, and how English came to be our first Foreign Language.

This section shows the development of foreign language studies in Sweden from the 19th century and onwards, and how English became the first foreign language in the Swedish school system.

2.4.1 The 19th century and the first half of the 20th century

In the 19th century, with developing economies and international contacts, the need for language knowledge grew throughout the western world, including Sweden. During this period the middle class arose and the sons of this class were expected to be able to communicate in foreign languages, especially during business trips and foreign travels. In Sweden the primary foreign languages were German and French (Lindström, 1998:9). These languages, however, were not regarded as vital or central in the educational system, according to Lindström. She mentions that the first professorship in modern languages in Sweden was appointed in 1816, embracing German, French and English.

During the first half of the 20th century many teachers and educators agreed that a postponement of the introduction of the first foreign language was advisable, until the time the mother tongue was
firmly set and established. In Sweden in those days this was at the age of ten, which, internationally speaking was relatively early. (Lindström 1998:9).

2.4.2 The period after the Second World War

The time period after the Second World War was a starting point for a new view on foreign languages in schools. In the United States and in several European countries the aim was to introduce the first foreign language earlier and also to allow children coming from all social groups to learn a foreign language. The development of travel and trade helped encourage these thoughts.

In the USA this particular interest in foreign languages led to the formation of a movement called FLES, Foreign Languages in the Elementary Schools, which turned out to be of vital importance to the further development of language education (Lindström 1998:9). In addition, the MLA, the Modern Language Association, held numerous conferences on the subject matter, and in 1956 MLA expressed full support for the FLES-movement (Lindström 1998:10).

In Sweden the school investigation and school commission of 1946, which planned and discussed the future Swedish school system, both realized and came to a conclusion that ALL Swedish children and youths should study a compulsory foreign language in school. The commission found three vital reasons for the introduction of a mandatory foreign language:

1. to bridge the gap between different social groups and classes.

2. to open a window to the world for the broad masses of society.

3. to provide all citizens with foreign language knowledge, which will be demanded in the future in different situations in professional life (Lindström 1998:11)
The reasons were social, political and economic, and, as Lindström points out, these must be regarded as forward-looking and insightful.

German and English were the two languages the commission chose between. English was in general regarded as easier for beginners, considering its rather simple initial structure. Yet another reason for choosing English as the compulsory foreign language in Swedish schools was its vast international coverage. In the curriculum of 1962 English was introduced as a mandatory subject from Grade 4 on (Lindström 1998:14).

The curriculum of 1962 (Lgr 62) stated that English should be compulsory in the Grades 4 through 7. The following national curriculum, Lgr 69, placed English already in Grade 3 (and should continue all through 9th Grade). This change gave the subject more weight and schools realized the importance of regular English education (Malmberg 2000:4).

The schools, however, did not have a positive attitude to this, since many teachers lacked qualified education. Thus, a Junior English Teaching course was set up, which implied a 95 hour training course distributed over the course of two years (Malmberg 2000:4).

Yet another problem was the fact that the teachers in 4th Grade, who were used to treating the pupils as beginners, faced pedagogical problems. Many treated the children as before, with the implication that the studies were from the beginning anyway (Malmberg 2000:4).

The next curriculum, Lgr 80, had these facts close at hand, and therefore added a paragraph which stated that if there were any particular reasons for postponing the introduction of English studies until Grade 4, it could be done. Still, the overall aim of the National School Board (Skolöverstyrelsen), was to commence English studies in Grade 3. The particular reasons for this were immigrant children and the problems they might face when learning two new foreign languages. It turned out that many municipalities, with a relatively low number of immigrant children, also decided to postpone the start of English until Grade 4. In 1991 only about 30 schools in Sweden introduced English in Grade 3. A
slightly higher number of schools had started English from Grade 1, but most schools waited until Grade 4 with the introduction of English. The general argument for this was that there was a firm belief that the pupils’ knowledge of Swedish would deteriorate if English was introduced at an early stage (Malmberg 2000:5).

The national curricula of 1994, Lpo 94, worked with the directives that English should be introduced in the first grade, and continue all through grade 9. The general thought was that the teachers could introduce English on a small scale in year one and successively give the subject more lesson time. From grade 4 English should be devoted more teaching time. (Malmberg 2000:5). The students in the Swedish compulsory school are entitled to a minimum of 480 hours of English and the division of this time is entirely up to each local school to decide on (Sundin 2001:155).

Statistics from The Swedish National Agency for Education in 1996 showed that more than one third of all pupils studied English already from first grade. Year one or year two were, according to this study, the most common Grades to commence English studies (Sundin 2001:155).

The most recent curriculum states the aims for English education in the first three grades of the junior level. It is assumed that all children in Sweden study English to some extent (not specified) during these first three years of comprehensive compulsory school (Läroplan för grundskolan 2011:31).
3. Method

The basis of my investigation is a field study conducted with the aid of questionnaires among pupils in the 3rd grade of the Junior level of the comprehensive compulsory school. In order to make the material applicable and somewhat credible I chose to involve two classes of all in all 40 students in my study. The 40 pupils in my investigation, 22 boys and 18 girls, all attended the same school, in two parallel third grade classes, in a small town in a rural municipality in West-Sweden.

The purpose was to find out about students’ thoughts and opinions about their English knowledge, how they think they learn language best and how they use the language. First of all I had a hard time finding the proper material suitable for pupils in 3rd Grade. I was advised by Pia Sundqvist, university lecturer at Karlstads Universitet (KAU), to use ready-made material published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket). On their web site I found a European language portfolio, which in parts was easily adaptable and highly suitable for my investigation.

I also conducted a pilot study of the material. A third Grade student was asked to fill out the questionnaire on his own. This turned out to be no problem for the student, when some guiding was provided. The questions and tasks were explained in detail to the student and then no more assistance was needed. The questionnaires were handed out by me to the students on the first occasion we met. They worked with them in class for a three-week-period, with the teachers as supervisors, reading through the questions to the students.
4. Analysis and results

4.1 Methodological analysis

This particular investigation is limited when it comes to the number of students involved. 40 students were asked to give their view on their achievements and attitudes towards the subject. All informants come from the same municipality in Sweden, a rural environment with mainly small townships with all in all about 9 500 inhabitants. The students come from the same school and the same Grade (3) which might indicate a more uncertain result since different schools and teachers work in very different ways with English.

The two classes were introduced to English already in grade 1, and the teachers had focused on listening and speaking initially. Reading and textbooks were presented to the students in third grade. The textbooks are still not used to a great extent, merely for reading practices and homework.

The basis of my questionnaire (see Appendix) consists of structured response alternatives in combination with a few open alternatives. The questionnaire has as a goal to reach a deeper understanding of how students relate to English. The first section of the questionnaire deals with the question of how the students use the language in their spare time. The second part is divided into questions targeting the language proficiency skills listening, speaking, reading and writing. Here the students were asked to color bubbles in correspondence with their perceived language knowledge. Thirdly, the students were asked to list the way they learn English best. The last section of the questionnaire deals with the students’ interest in language studies and an evaluation of language studies in general (see Appendix).

In several cases the questions are asked in a qualitative way, thereby giving the questionnaire a qualitative character. The questions strive to focus on set themes (personal opinions and attitudes...
about achievements). Furthermore, the questions are quantitative when it comes to the options well, adequate and little in the students’ self-estimation of proficiency. The different aspects mentioned above suggest that the questionnaire combines a qualitative and a quantitative approach (Kvale, 1997:35).

4.2 Results

This section contains the results of the questionnaire. The pupils’ responses are presented in diagrams, tables and text. The first section of the questionnaire deals with the students’ use of English. The second part is about perceived knowledge in English, and the last part lets the students consider the importance of language studies.

The three parts of the questionnaire:

1. How do you use English?

2. a) How do you regard your own knowledge in English, with a focus on listening, speaking, reading and writing?

   b) How do you think that you learn English best?

3. What is your attitude towards foreign language studies?

The second and third parts are the most relevant for my investigation, but the first part about the use of English also gives an indication to what extent English is a part of the daily life for the 9-year-old students in the survey. The daily encounters and use of English naturally adds to the positive attitudes and provides the students with a motivation to learn in order to be able to communicate and interact.
### 4.2.1. How do you use English?

This question was followed by the alternatives talking, watching TV/video, reading magazines/books, listening to music, singing, using the computer and writing. The students could choose between the quantitative alternatives *Often, Sometimes* and *Never*. The figures refer to student replies. The students were free to tick any number of areas without putting them in any order.

#### Table 1. The students’ use of English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching TV/video</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading magazines/books</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to music</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the computer</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most students listen to music often or sometimes, watch TV/video or use the computer when they come across English. A high number of students also say that they talk English often.

### 4.2.2. My knowledge of English

This section is divided into four different categories: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The students were asked to evaluate different statements in regards to their own conception of their achievements. The statements were presented in bubbles. If the student thought that he achieved well, he would color the bubble green. Adequate grasp of the area meant that the bubble should be colored blue. Last, little knowledge would mean that the bubble should be painted red (see Appendix).

First the total number of bubbles in the entire investigated material is presented, followed by the total number of green, blue and red bubbles. The total is then converted into percent figures. These
are given in tables. A chart then shows the same data, where the columns have been colored accordingly.

**A. Listening.** The different alternatives were:

- I can understand very simple instructions, for instance from my teacher.
- When I hear people talk I can now and then understand common words.
- I can understand when someone greets me and asks how I feel.
- I can understand simple questions when someone speaks slowly and clearly.
- I can understand when someone tells very simply about himself and his family.

(for more details, see Appendix)

**Table 2. Self-estimated student listening proficiency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total nr of bubbles</th>
<th>green (well)</th>
<th>blue (adequate)</th>
<th>red (little)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (200)</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>10,5</td>
<td>2,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Chart 1: Self-estimated student listening proficiency](image)

Listener is a proficiency which does not involve any major problems for the students in this survey. The students are in general content with their own listening ability and the number of green and blue bubbles indicates that the students feel they are quite proficient in these.
When it comes to the individual results, 14 students color all listening bubbles green, implying that they feel confident with all the given examples. Only four students color red bubbles, and then only one bubble out of five per student. Three of these students color the statement “I can understand simple questions when someone speaks slowly and clearly”. All in all five bubbles are colored red in the entire searched material, which indicates that the students in general feel very confident about their listening proficiency.

B. **Speaking:** The different alternatives were:

- I can say some days of the week, months, seasons and times of the day.
- I can sing along in some songs
- I can count to 100
- I can say names on a few things, for instance pieces of clothing, food and body parts
- I can say something about my family
- I can say how old I am
- I can mention some colors
- I can say who I am and where I live

(see Appendix)

**Table 3. Self-estimated student speaking proficiency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total nr of bubbles</th>
<th>green (well)</th>
<th>blue (adequate)</th>
<th>red (little)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (320)</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>65,5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chart 2: Self-estimated student speaking proficiency**
Speaking is a language segment where a majority of the students perceive that they are able to express themselves well. At the same time 18 students color one or more bubbles red, which indicates that speaking is troublesome to some of the students.

The results for the individuals vary a lot. Five students feel that they master speaking on this level, with all eight bubbles colored green. All in all 18 students color one or more bubbles red, which suggests that they find speaking difficult in some situations. The total number of red bubbles is 50.

The statement with the highest number of red bubbles was: I can count to 100, which was colored by 14 students. In second place came “I can say something about my family”, with 9 red bubbles.

C. Reading. The different alternatives were:

- I can read and understand some words and simple expressions, for instance signs
- I can read and understand simple picture texts and text in bubbles
- I can read and understand short messages
- I can read and understand very simple instructions, for example “listen, draw, write…”
- I can read and understand very simple dialogues
- I can recognize and understand simple lyrics and nursery rhymes

(see Appendix)

Table 4. Self-estimated student reading proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total nr of bubbles</th>
<th>green (well)</th>
<th>blue (adequate)</th>
<th>red (little)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (240)</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reading is a proficiency which is regarded as well-achieved by a majority of the students. Four students consider themselves to be good readers, with all bubbles green colored. Eight students color one or more bubbles red, but the total number of red bubbles is 15. The statement “I can read and understand simple picture texts and texts in bubbles” was colored red by eight students. The remaining seven red bubbles were spread between “I can read and understand very simple dialogues” (4) and “I can recognize and understand simple lyrics and nursery rhymes” (3).

D. Writing. The different alternatives were:

- I can write very simple questions
- I can present people with some very simple sentences.
- I can write a simple greeting, on a card or a text message
- I can write short, simple messages
- I can write some simple sentences about myself
- I can write a short dialogue (see Appendix)
Table 5. Self-estimated student writing proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total nr of bubbles</th>
<th>green (well)</th>
<th>blue (adequate)</th>
<th>red (little)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (240)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 4: Self-estimated writing proficiency

Writing is the language proficiency where by far the highest number of red bubbles can be found. The green and blue bubbles are few, showing that writing is a proficiency which is regarded as difficult for the 3rd grade students. Here the greatest number of individual students who colored all bubbles red can be found. 22 students think that their writing is inadequate in every sense in the given examples. Two students, however, feel that they master writing on this level. By far the most common red colored statement was “I can write a short dialogue” (28 red bubbles), followed by the statement “I can present people with some very simple sentences” (14 red bubbles).

Comments

This part of the investigation concerning the students’ perceived knowledge of English indicates that the students have ideas of what they possibly know. This might not correspond with their real
abilities, but it is likely to have a great impact on their motivation, as Dörnyei describes it when he talks about the students’ own interpretation of their achievements being central to strengthen motivation, not the actual level of success (Dörnyei 2001:118).

Listening is the language skill that most students feel confident about. All in all, 87 % of all bubbles were colored green in the listening field, and only 2,5 % were colored red, indicating that the students feel very confident about their listening proficiency in general.

Speaking comes second with 65,5 % green bubbles, meaning that these students are of the opinion that they are able to speak English according to the given examples. At the same time 50 bubbles were colored red in the speaking section, indicating that many students also find it difficult to speak English.

Reading follows next, with 62 % green colored bubbles.

Writing is the area of language where the students’ general perceived proficiency is regarded as weak. A total of 68 % of all bubbles are colored red in the investigation concerning writing proficiency, stressing the students’ general awareness of their shortcomings in this field. Writing is the most difficult achievement in a foreign language, or in any language. The English education has mainly been conducted in these two classes without any books for the first two years. Printed material was not introduced to the students until in the third grade. This explains why students feel that they have a relatively high level of listening and speaking ability. The perceived student reading ability must also be considered high, but one of the teachers noted that the particular English books in these two classes are for beginners and far too simple for the students at this point. The development in the native language Swedish might explain the reading ability in English as well, which Holmstrand also found in his EPÅL-survey in the 1980s (Holmstrand 1983:93).
The individual results show that the students evaluate certain elements of the language acquisition differently. Two students color ALL bubbles green in all four sections, and no one colors all sections red.

4.2.3. How do you learn English best?

This question was also accompanied by a number of alternatives, apart from a free choice. The question and answer alternatives were as follows:

How do you think that you learn a language best?

When I...

Table 6. When do you learn a language best?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>watch TV/video</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sing</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>option: go to school</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listen to music</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>play computer game</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>play with friends</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talk to friends</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>write</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chat on the web</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Technological aids are introduced at an early stage in the students’ lives at home, and they use these aids to a generally large extent. Computers, TV and music players all offer a vast variety of English, and the children in my survey are no exception. Reading comes far down on the list, but considering the early stage of learning English one can say that 13 students who regard reading as an important source of language knowledge is a relatively positive number at this point, when we take into account it has competitors such as all other media and resources. School occupies a top position on the list, with 28 students who think that it provides them with necessary knowledge in English. Last,
it is interesting to notice that no less than 9 pupils say that they use English when playing with or talking to friends.

4.2.4. *Students’ attitudes towards foreign languages*

The final question about if the students consider language studies important was answered affirmatively by 39 out of 40 students.

The answers to the additional question about what languages they would like to study were a bit of a surprise to me. The languages the 9-year-old students wish to study show a wide range, from Norwegian to Chinese. Some arguments for foreign language studies were: “It is good to know foreign languages when my family and I go abroad. It is a good way to make new friends. It is fun. Spanish is cool. My mother studies French. My brother studies German. I have relatives in Spain. I will be able to get a better job”.

All in all the students show great interest and 39 out of 40 are positive towards foreign language studies.

*Table 7. Desired future language studies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>No of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign language</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Summary of results

The 40 students in my investigation all express great awareness about and insight into the question of their perceived knowledge of English. When looking at the four elements of language acquisition, listening, speaking, reading and writing, the students in the survey show a general ability to evaluate their personal achievements and knowledge subjectively. Listening and speaking are the areas where the students express the highest degree of skill. Only four students have colored altogether five red bubbles in the listening section and eight students have colored altogether 15 bubbles red. The most difficult element, writing, where the language skills and grammatical correctness requirements are most clearly requested, is the one where the students feel that their ability is weaker, with no less than 22 students who color all bubbles red.

All students, with one exception, agree that language studies are important for them. It was truly interesting to see the variety of languages that they wish to study in the future. Chinese and Japanese together with Spanish, Greek and sign languages show how the 9-year-old students are aware of the world around them, and that they are eager to broaden their knowledge.

This positive attitude to foreign language studies and the way the students perceive their achievements in English seem to be linked together. When a certain level of achievement has been reached it is likely that one will develop a positive attitude to the subject in question. This positive attitude is likely to have an impact on the motivation of the students, which in turn leads to an assumption of even further achievements in the language. This is supported by Dörnyei, who writes about the learners’ expectancy of success. “We do things best if we believe we can succeed. Similarly, we learn best when we expect success” (Dörnyei, 2001:57).
4.4 Discussion

The most recent national curriculum (Lgr 2011) for the 9-year compulsory comprehensive school in Sweden does not only suggest but actually stresses that English should be introduced during the junior level, i.e. some time during the first three years, when the children are seven to nine years old. In my analysis I chose to investigate two 3rd grade classes which had worked with English as described in the most recent curriculum.

Language acquisition research that has been conducted over the past decades by among others Chomsky, Brown and Krashen, has given a deep insight into the language learning process. Chomsky’s LAD theory suggested that all children have an innate ability to acquire language knowledge, in a sense a built-in universal grammar (Mentioned in Eriksson & Tholin 1996:11). Stephen Krashen stresses the importance of meaningful and understandable language. If the contents of the language are of personal concern to us as learners it helps in the acquisition process (Mentioned in Eriksson & Tholin 1996: 11-12). The learners’ communicative needs and their attitudes towards the country or community where the language is spoken are of vital importance to the motivation of learning a foreign language. If there is a need to speak in different situations the motivation rises (Lightbown & Spada 2006:63). Their attitude towards foreign language studies also seems to be positive, which further adds to the language study motivation.

Apart from writing the students in my investigation feel that they master the language at their level to a great extent. A high degree of perceived skills heightens students’ motivation, and the motivation adds to the learning efficiency in a positive spiral.

When you feel that you master a subject or at least have a grasp of what you do it is for natural reasons more likely that you will develop a positive attitude to the subject in question. This positive attitude is likely to have an impact on the motivation of the students, which in turn leads to an
assumption of even further achievements in the language. “We do things best, if we believe we can succeed” (Dörnyei, 2001:57).

All these things linked together, attitudes towards the subject, needs to use the language and finally the feeling of retrospective self-evaluation help create a positive study platform which might prove useful in the future studies.

4.5 Further research

The investigation has been most challenging and rewarding. My insight into the introduction of English at the Junior Level of the Swedish compulsory comprehensive school has deepened. The English education is based on the students’ ability to utter simple words and phrases, and the use of books and printed material is postponed. My concern is what happens next. When do the student results start to drop? It would be interesting to follow this group of students through the system and see what happens when books are introduced and the educational methods change into more formal settings, with new requirements of writing, language structures and complex contents. Is it possible to somehow adapt the teaching to fit everyone, through individualization, and still maintain the positive results from the early years? This should be of concern to all of in the school system, how to manage to guide the students through the system with less failures.

An interesting comparison could be to conduct a similar investigation in classes in more densely populated areas, to see if there are any major discrepancies or differences between rural and city schools.

Another point of interest could be to look at the achievements and attitudes of students who have started with English later, i.e. 3rd or 4th grade, to see if there are any clear differences in perceived knowledge or attitudes of English, in comparison with the sample in the present study.
5. References


Cambridge Online Dictionary


Europeisk språkportfolio 6-11 år
European Language Portfolio 6-11 years old
Mina kontakter med engelska
(språk)

Var använder du språket?
(Du kan kryssa för mer än ett alternativ)
☐ hemma
☐ i skolan
☐ på fritiden
☐ på andra platser. Var?

Vem använder du språket tillsammans med?
(Du kan kryssa för mer än ett alternativ)
☐ mamma
☐ pappa
☐ syskon
☐ släktingar
☐ andra? vilka?

lärare
kamrater på fritiden
kamrater i skolan
Hur använder du språket?  
(Sätt ett kryss på varje rad)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ofta</th>
<th>ibland</th>
<th>aldrig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jag pratar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag tittar på TV/video</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag läser tidningar eller böcker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag lyssnar på musik</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag sjunger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag använder datorn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag skriver</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kommer du på några andra sätt?

..........................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................
Färglägg bubblorna!
Jag kan det lite=röd
Jag kan det ganska bra=blå
Jag kan det bra=grön

SPRÅK:

CHECKLISTA

Jag kan förstå mycket enkla instruktioner, t.ex. från min lärare.

När jag hör människor prata kan jag då och då förstå vanliga ord.

Jag kan förstå när någon hälsar på mig och frågar hur jag mår.

Jag kan förstå enkla frågor när någon talar långsamt och tydligt.

Jag kan förstå när någon berättar mycket enkelt om sig själv och sin familj.

Detta kan jag också förstå:
Färglägg bubblorna!
Jag kan det lite=röd
Jag kan det ganska bra=blå
Jag kan det bra=grön

CHECKLISTA

**SPRÅK:**

Jag kan säga några veckodagar, månader, årstider och klockslag.

Jag kan räkna till 100.

Jag kan säga vem jag är och var jag bor.

Jag kan sjunga med i några sånger.

Jag kan säga några färger.

Jag kan säga hur gammal jag är.

Jag kan säga namn på några saker, t.ex. kläder, mat och kroppsdelar.

Jag kan säga något om min familj.

Detta kan jag också säga:
Färglägg bubborna!
Jag kan det lite-röd  
Jag kan det ganska bra-blå  
Jag kan det bra-grön

**Språk:**

CHECKLISTA

Jag kan läsa och förstå några ord och enkla uttryck, t.ex. på skyttar.

Jag kan läsa och förstå mycket enkla dialoger.

Jag kan läsa och förstå korta meddelanden.

Jag kan läsa och förstå mycket enkla bildtexter och text i pratbubblor.

Jag kan läsa och förstå enkla sångtexter och ramsor.

Jag kan läsa och förstå enkla rubriker, t.ex. på affischer.

Detta kan jag också läsa:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Färglägg bubborna!
Jag kan det lite=röd
Jag kan det ganska bra=blå
Jag kan det bra=grön

**SPRÅK:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHECKLISTA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jag kan presentera personer med några mycket enkla meningar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag kan skriva mycket enkla frågor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag kan skriva en enkel hälsning, t.ex. ett kort eller ett textmeddelande.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag kan skriva en kort dialog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jag kan skriva några enkla meningar om mig själv.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Detta kan jag också skriva:
Hur tycker du att du lär dig språk bäst?
(Du kan kryssa för mer än ett alternativ)

När jag ...

☐ tittar på TV/video   ☐ läser
☐ lyssnar på musik   ☐ chattar på nätet
☐ sjunger   ☐ skriver
☐ pratar med vänner   ☐ leker
☐ spelar spel/dataspel

Har du några andra sätt som du lär dig språk på?

..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
..........................................................
Jag skulle vilja lära mig de här språken:

Varför?

Tycker du att det är viktigt att kunna språk?

☐ Ja  ☐ Nej

Förklara varför!