Learning by Doing
Can Students Become More Proficient in Grammar Through Feedback by Underlining?

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Abstract

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Abstract: The aim of this paper was to investigate if students could become more proficient in their grammatical skills through feedback by underlining. The focus is on the problems students have with verbs when they learn English as a foreign language. 16 students from two different classes participated in the investigation. Eight of the students were interviewed on two occasions. They were shown essays they had written during the fall term of 2005. The teacher had underlined the errors they had made. During the interviews the students were asked to correct and explain the errors. The other eight students served as a control group since it could be suspected that the interviews might have an impact on the students’ performance.

The results of this paper show that the students who were interviewed were able to correct most of the errors that had been underlined. The students in this group also seemed to improve more than the control group, but the results of this investigation are inconclusive, since the total number of errors made was fairly small. Therefore, it is difficult to determine how much the students improved their proficiency in English grammar.

Nyckelord: Interlanguage, feedback errors, underlining, essay writing, correction
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1. Introduction and aims

Learning a new language opens doors to new worlds. New languages introduce us to new cultures and new people, but at the same time we are faced with all the difficulties language acquisition means. There are no ‘simple’ languages. As Aitchison (1994:630) says: “A language which is simple and regular in one respect is likely to be complex and confusing in others”. When we start the acquisition of a new language we do that with a bag of knowledge filled with features, rules and customs of our mother tongue. Different languages will have different features and it is easy to transfer features from our mother tongue, unintentionally, into the second language.

At one point or other, every teacher has probably thought about why students do not embrace what they are taught, but instead tend to make the same grammatical errors over and over again. Moreover, students think about why they, after many years of studying English, still struggle with the same errors. In order to improve our language skills we need to develop an understanding of the errors we make. Learners should take responsibility for their own learning process along with guidance from the teacher. Process-writing, problem-solving, task-based and structure-based activities all seem to have an impact on learners’ language awareness (Köhlmyr 2001:291).

Most students find grammar especially difficult when they start learning a second language, and some students in secondary school are not sure how to explain grammar rules (Malmberg et al 2000:14). One aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is the errors learners make when they learn a second language, and in what ways these errors are relevant to the learning process.

The aim of this paper is to look at the impact of teacher feedback on errors. Furthermore, the aim is to investigate if students can become more proficient in grammar by the help of teacher feedback. The focus will be on Swedish learners’ problems in the use of verb forms in English. The primary material in my investigation consists of essays written by 16 students in two different classes. After collecting the essays, eight students in one class in upper secondary school were interviewed twice. In the first interview, they were asked some general questions about their attitudes towards English and the learning process. After that they were
shown three essays they had written during the fall of 2005. The teacher had underlined their errors and the students were asked to correct the errors underlined by the teacher and explain what was wrong. The purpose of the first interview was to see if the method of giving feedback by underlining was an efficient way of teaching grammar. In the second interview, after the students had written their last essay for the semester, they were asked what they thought about the method. Eight students in the other class formed a control group, since it could be suspected that the first interview might have an effect on the students’ performance.

2. Background

This section will focus on second language learning in general, how learners develop their learning skills and the importance of feedback. Furthermore, this section will focus on the errors learners tend to make in second language acquisition in general and verbs in particular.

2.1 Second language vs. foreign language learning

Second language acquisition refers to learning the language that is in majority in the society or is the official language, but is not the learner’s mother tongue. Foreign language acquisition, on the other hand, is when a learner acquires the language of another country (Cook 2003:7). Foreign language acquisition goes under the abbreviation FLA. Second language acquisition is referred to by the term SLA. SLA includes both natural (untutored) acquisition and instructed (tutored) acquisition (Ellis 1985:5).

2.1.1 Interlanguage

The term interlanguage was coined by Larry Selinker in 1969. It refers to a system between one’s first language and the target language. This is a structured system the learner produces which differs from the language of a native speaker (Corder 1981:2). A learner creates a grammatical system that is close to the grammatical system of the language that is being acquired. Learners develop hypotheses about the nature of the target language rules and then test them in order to verify or reject the hypothesis. This is a process students perform both consciously and subconsciously (Ellis 1985:47-8). One way of finding out about learners’ interlanguage is to study what errors they make due to the differences between the first language and the target language. The errors show that the students are using some kind of system to learn the language and they also show how close to the goal the student is. All learners test the rules of the language and the errors they make are of great importance.
(Corder 1981:10). The errors learners make are different in different stages in the acquisition process, and research has shown that errors indicate how proficient the learner is (Thornbury 1999:116). Corder (1981:8) states that some of the tactics a second language learner uses are very similar to those used by children learning their first language. It is necessary, though, to point out that there is a clear distinction between the strategies. The example given below is from a child’s acquisition of his/her mother tongue, but learners of a second language work in similar ways:

**Mother:** Did Billy have his egg cut up for him at breakfast?
**Child:** Yes, I showed him.
**Mother:** You what?
**Child:** I showed him.
**Mother:** You showed him?
**Child:** I seed him.
**Mother:** Ah, you saw him.
**Child:** Yes, I saw him. (Corder 1981:11).

When acquiring a second language it is impossible to avoid making errors. Students make different types of errors and they can be identified as lexical errors, grammatical errors and discourse errors. Lexical errors are mistakes learners make when they choose the wrong word for what they want to express: *my brother was stopping in the door* instead of *standing*. Grammatical errors concern mistakes in the form of words *the doorbell rangs*; *we speaked*. Discourse errors relate to how sentences are made and put together in order to make whole texts. Most of the time the errors overlap in more than one of the categories listed above, which means that the type of error is not always as clear as in these examples (Thornbury 1999:114).

### 2.1.2 Interference and transfer

Old habits can be hard to break and therefore complicate the acquisition of new habits. Patterns from the learner’s mother tongue are not always in accordance with patterns in the second language (Heny 1994:161-163). These patterns can stand in the way of learning the patterns of the target language and are called interference. Interference can appear as different types of transfer, referred to as positive and negative transfer. Transfer does not necessarily result in errors. Sometimes the two languages express meaning in the same way. When Swedish people refer to their age they use the same pattern as English people: *I’m 20*

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1 The asterisk indicates an ungrammatical sentence.
years old / Jag är 20 år gammal. Here the learner can transfer the pattern from the mother tongue into the target language, a so-called positive transfer. Transfer will be negative when previous learning prevents or inhibits the learning of new patterns; so called **proactive inhibition**. Interference is the result of this. (Ellis 1985:22).

When the two languages share a meaning but express it differently, errors may occur due to this negative feature. In Swedish we say *att få panik*; English does not use the phrase *get panic* to express this, but instead uses the verb *to panic*. When Swedish students write this they often translate it into *She got panic* instead of the correct form *she panicked* (Ellis 1985:22). Some negative features that students transfer into their second language are on different phonological, grammatical and lexical levels. Phonological transfer includes stress, intonation, speech sounds and accents. The learner may have problems with pronouncing certain sounds in the second language that do not exist in the mother tongue, and the learner gets a “foreign” accent. Grammatical transfer includes word order, use of pronouns and determiners and tense. Such transfer occurs when there are differences between the grammatical structures of the two languages, e.g. in the use of the articles. In the Swedish sentence *Jag kommer att hålla kontakten med dem*, the definite form –*en* is used. Swedish learners translate this into *I will keep the contact with them*, which is wrong since English does not use the definite article (Köhlmyr 2001:38). Lexical transfer is when learners use words from their first language and convert them into sounding like a word in the target language. There is an anecdote, which many people have heard, about a Swedish female minister who, in an international meeting, is conversing with a foreign colleague. On one occasion she says *I’ve been raping cucumbers all day*. Instead of using the correct word *belch* she takes the Swedish equivalent *rapa* and turns it into an English sounding word. The English word *to rape* means to abuse a person sexually by force. The Swedish minister commits a faux pas and her utterance turns into something very different from what she intended to say.

**2.2 Learning through feedback**

Research shows that errors are important in the acquisition of a second language, and therefore feedback on errors is important. One problem with this is that not all students like to be corrected and sometimes they do not want to admit their errors. There are several different views on whether students’ errors should be corrected or not. Some teachers say that correcting the students will interfere with their process of learning; others claim it is stressful
for the students to be corrected (Thornbury 1999:116). There are also those who claim that if errors are passed by uncorrected and not pointed out to students, it may lead to fossilization. Fossilization is when the learners of a second language have gained the adequate knowledge they need to fulfil the communicative and emotional needs they have, and stop learning (Ellis, 1985:11). Today, as already mentioned, researchers assert that making errors is a proof that the student is making progress in acquiring the language (Thornbury 1999:116).

Jean Chandler (2003) did a study on teacher feedback in order to see what impact the different kinds of feedback have on second language learners. In her investigation she tested four types of feedback, to see which one gave the best results. The four types of feedback were Correction (writing the correct word above the wrong word), Underlining with description, Description of type only and Underlining. The study showed a large decrease in the number of errors when the teacher had included Corrections, but Underlining with description was the best method to learn how to not make the errors in the future. The students could correct two thirds of the errors when they received this sort of response. Description of type only and Underlining were not as efficient as the two previous forms of response. Nevertheless, more than half of the errors could be corrected when the teacher had pointed out the location or type of the error. Chandler’s research also shows that feedback given by Underlining or Correction resulted in more correct writing on the students’ next assignment.

Another interesting aspect of Chandler’s study is that different students responded differently to the different types of feedback. Many of the students improved their writing by the feedback type Correcting, while some students produced their most efficient writing when the teacher used feedback by Underlining. Correction and Underlining are both efficient but the study showed Correction to be the most effective one measured by the change in the rate of accuracy of the students’ writing. In conclusion, this seems to be due to the fact that students are able to correct more errors after this response than after the others. “Perhaps when […] students can see their errors corrected soon after writing, they internalize the correct form better” (Chandler 2003:291). Chandler’s study shows two things and the first is that students need teacher feedback on errors and they also need to make corrections in order to increase their proficiency. Secondly, the study shows that not all feedback improves students’ accuracy to the same extent, although it is better than no feedback at all. Students who receive no feedback make little or no improvement (Chandler 2003:291). Negative feedback may also be combined with positive feedback, and it is very important that there is a balance. Too much
negative feedback can destroy a learner’s motivation, and too little may affect the development (or lack thereof) over time (Thornbury 1999:126). When we give feedback we need to shift focus to the positive side of errors. The errors do not only show what mistakes the learners make, but they also indicate what the learner can do. It can be counterproductive for the learners when their errors are being ignored, because in that way their success is being ignored as well (Ancker 2000).

2.3 Swedish learners’ problems with verbs in written English

All throughout the process of learning a second language, learners will make errors. The errors will be different in different stages in the acquisition. The errors will occur at different levels of the language, i.e. the phonological, grammatical and lexical levels. The focus of this paper is on how feedback on essays may help students improve their grammar, especially their use of verbs. This section will highlight the problems Swedish learners may have in this area.

In a sentence, the verb is what one might call the backbone of the clause and the main verb of the clause decides what types of complements there should be (Svartvik & Sager 1996:10). Many of the structures and rules of verbs are similar in English and Swedish: regular verbs form the past tense by means of a dental suffix (i.e. d and t in the past tense as in the English word kissed and Swedish kysste), there is internal vowel shift in the past tense with irregular verbs (as in the English verbs sit –sat, and the Swedish equivalents sätta –satt), the auxiliary verbs are similar (the English can, shall, must and the Swedish kan, ska, måste) and most of the verb tenses correspond (Routledge 2003). Despite these similarities there are differences that cause problems for students. Some of them will be discussed below.

2.3.1 Regular and irregular verbs

All Germanic languages have regular and irregular verbs. Irregular verbs change the stem vowel, while regular verbs attach a suffix. The number of irregular verbs in present-day English is lower than it was in Old and Middle English. Today new verbs become regular automatically. In Swedish there are similar tendencies: one example of an irregular verb becoming regular is simma: simmade, simmat are the regular forms while sam, summit are the older irregular forms (Odenstedt 2000:108). Examples of irregular verbs in English are to take – took, to come – came, and in Swedish att krypa – kröp, att hjuda – bjöd. One problem Swedish students may have is the fact that there are regular verbs that look like they are
irregular but they are not since there is no vowel shift: *have – had. What causes the problem is the fact that the general rule on how to form regular and irregular verbs cannot always be applied.

Learners of English have a tendency to overuse the regular past tense endings and form the past tense of irregular verbs as if they were regular. This is due to the fact that the learner applies the rule of regular past tense at an earlier stage than the rule of irregular past tense. The learner then tends to overgeneralize the rule of regular verbs and creates forms like *comed,* eated and *falled. In addition, they may also overgeneralize the rule of irregular verbs once it has been acquired. Learners may sometimes use their knowledge of the irregular *drink, drank, drunk* to result in *think,* thank, *thunk; sing, sang* yielding *bring,* brang and the like. This type of error applies to children learning their first language as well as to adults learning a second language (Owens 1994:155-157).

### 2.3.2 Subject-Verb concord

English and Swedish are both predominantly configurational languages, which means that word order rather than inflections is used to indicate the relationship between words. The other type of language is a non-configurative language where inflections prevail, as in e.g. German, Russian and Latin (Aitchison 1999). Most languages have elements from both types and one example of a non-configurative element in English is the present tense –s used in the third person singular. “Present tense is uninflected apart from the third person singular (he/she/it rides) [...]”, which causes foreign students endless trouble” (Odenstedt 2000:109).

In the book The Grammar Book, Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman have listed a number of problems learners face when they start to learn English as a second language (cited in Pilleux, 2003). One is that they often leave out the inflectional –s in the third person singular, e.g. *Sharon live in Seattle.* When the student has acquired the rule there is a risk of overgeneralization, *Sharon cans dance* and even transfer of this rule to all verbs: *I goes to Stanford.* Another problem is the overuse of the third person -s in the plural: *the boys goes to Stanford.* When students see a noun in the plural (boys), they automatically want to make the verb plural as well and add an –s (goes). Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman also listed rules for troublesome cases in subject-verb concord and provided examples. The examples show cases that can be difficult to learn in the early acquisition of English as a second language, but native speakers also make errors in these areas. One area that is difficult is represented by
nouns in the singular that end in –s, which makes them look like plurals when they actually are singular, e.g. no news is good news; this series is very interesting. Another part that causes confusion is the use of a pair of. When the word pair is included it takes the singular: where is my new pair of trousers; but when pair is left out it takes plural: your trousers are on the sofa. Collective nouns, on the other hand, may take either singular or plural depending on the meaning: our school team has won all its games / our school team have won all their games (cited in Pilleux, 2003).

2.3.3 Tense
Despite all the similarities in the English and Swedish use of tense, there are occasions when the tense differs in the two languages and they cause problems for the learner. Most of the time the tense systems of English and Swedish are very similar, but sometimes they differ and that is what causes problems to the students. Köhlyr (2001) shows that many Swedish students have problems with the simple present tense, and often replace it with the present progressive form: “The most frequent form of category substitution involving the simple present consists in replacing it with the present progressive” (Köhlmyr 2001:56). Another common error is to replace the simple present tense with the simple past tense.

English uses present tense sometimes when Swedish uses past tense: I am glad we met / det var roligt att träffas. Occasionally it is the other way around. When something is concluded and happened in the past, English uses past time while Swedish uses the presents tense: I was born on May 16 1979 / jag är född 16 maj 1979 (Svartvik & Sager 1996:93). The perfect tense and the pluperfect tense are used fairly similarly but the Swedish auxiliary verbs ha (perfect) and hade (pluperfect) may be left out in subordinate clauses which is impossible in English: as soon as you have apologized you can leave / du får gå så snart du (har) bett om ursäkt; the man she had met was the President / mannen hon (hade) träffat var presidenten (Ljung & Ohlander 2000:72-79).

2.3.4 Progressive aspect and use of the –ing form
The English –ing form can sometimes be difficult for Swedish students to acquire. The –ing form is used in different syntactic patterns, and it might be difficult for learners to get them right. One of the most important uses of the –ing form is the progressive. The progressive is used to indicate something on-going or with a limited time span, and must include a form of the auxiliary verb be; he is fishing, he had been fishing for two hours when [...]. The
progressive can be used with action verbs such as eat, run, drink, sleep, but it is not used with verbs of state such as need, know and like (Owens, 1994:153). English is the only Germanic language that has the progressive aspect. According to Odenstedt (2000:108f), the form first appeared in Middle English with the prefix a–: he is areading. The a– was a development of on– and meant he is in a state of reading. Later this a– was dropped and the modern he is reading became the standard form. Swedish does not have the progressive aspect; instead Swedish uses the simple form or paraphrases (Odenstedt 2000:109). A common error learners make when they use the progressive form is to leave out the auxiliary (Owens 1994:152-3).

The –ing form on its own is the verb form used after prepositions. In Swedish we use the infinitive form instead: interested in singing / intresserad av att sjunga. There are occasions when the preposition can be left out in Swedish, whereas that is impossible in English: He is used to winning (han är van /vid/ att vinna) (Svartvik & Sager 1991:146).

The form that is likely to be the most problematic for students to grasp is the –ing form dependent on certain verbs. Some examples where a verb is followed by the –ing form are: He admits having once used [...] I don’t fancy seeing her again. The counterpart to this in Swedish is a finite clause: han medger att han en gång har använt [...], or the infinitive: jag har ingen lust att träffa henne igen (Svartvik & Sager 1996:377).

2.4 Language awareness

When students learn a new language, one core issue is to have a certain awareness of the target language. Researchers like Schmidt and Ellis (cited in Malmberg et al, 2000:40) argue that language awareness is necessary in order to learn a second language. If students are to be able to do anything about their linguistic errors, language awareness seems to be essential (McLaughlin 1990, Batstone 1994 cited in Köhlmyr 2001:290). The learner needs to have some awareness of the target language’s grammatical structure, and grammar instruction of different types may trigger this awareness (Köhlmyr 2001:290). Language awareness is not necessary, but it facilitates the acquisition of a second language (Köhlmyr 2001:291).

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2 S. Granath, personal communication.
2.4.1 The GUME project

In the 1970s, a research project was conducted in Sweden. The aim was to look at what was the most efficient method in order to understand grammar rules and a study was designed in order to compare explicit and implicit methods. The project was called the GUME project and took place in Gothenburg (Malmberg et al. 2000:40). Students at different ages were taught grammatical rules using these two methods. In the explicit method, the students were given rules in English and in Swedish and these rules were combined with exercises. Exercises on grammatical structures were given in the implicit method, but without any explanations of the rules. The differences in the students’ knowledge before and after the study were measured. In that way the researchers could conclude which method was the most efficient one. The results showed that in grade 1-9 there were non-significant improvements with both methods, but in grade 10-12 the explicit method showed most improvements. The researchers did not get any answers to their question of what it is that leads the students to the final product: what were the students thinking when they were trying to solve the grammatical problems they were given?

2.4.2 The STRIMS project

In 1987/1988 a research project started that was called the STRIMS project. STRIMS stands for “Strategier för inlärning av moderna språk” (strategies for the acquisition of modern languages [my translation]). The project recorded the thoughts Swedish students in compulsory and upper secondary school have when they solve their daily tasks during language lessons – and how these thoughts lead to individual patterns of actions and strategies. The STRIMS project wanted to study what the GUME project had not taken up in their research. In STRIMS there were four researchers, one for each of the modern languages English, French, German and Spanish. The researchers did a longitudinal study on students aged 12-19 during a time period of three years. The reason why they chose to follow students at the ages of 12-19 was that they thought they would see a development in the students’ strategies due to the students getting older and more mature (Malmberg et al. 2000:40f).

All students who participated in the study answered a question on what they found to be difficult in language acquisition, and the predominating answer in all four languages was “grammar”. Neither the students in grade 9, nor the students in the vocational training class in upper secondary school mentioned grammar rules or grammar books when they explained how they learn grammar. Instead, the students said they “check the examples carefully”,...
“memorize the examples”, “take the examples from the book and try to come up with a system” and the like. Many students seemed to believe that they could find the right grammatical form by listening to “what sounds more correct”. The students in the theoretical classes in upper secondary school, on the other hand, mentioned grammar rules quite frequently when they talked about how they learn English. Especially one of the classes in upper secondary school seemed to have a more reflecting approach, and used the strategy of first reading the rule and then working with examples and exercises. This is the so-called explicit method. Inger Bergström, who was in charge of the English part of the study, commented that this is astonishing considering that teachers have tried to encourage an implicit approach to grammar acquisition. This means that the students are encouraged to practise drawing their own conclusions based on the input they get from their teachers (Malmberg et al 2000:16).

When the students in grade 6 were to explain if a sentence was correct or not they referred to whether it sounded right or not. It was rare that the students could apply and refer to grammatical rules. This pattern remained through grade 7 as well, but then it was possible to see a development towards a consciousness of the simplest structures such as the plural –s, third person present tense –s and the do-construction. In grade 8, there seemed to be a change according to Inger Bergström. The students seemed to think more about the reasons and not only what sounded correct. Bergström’s conclusion was that teachers should limit their use of grammatical rules in grade 6, and only work with the most basic structures in grade 7. In grades 8 and 9 the students had developed an analytic skill and were more experienced in English. Therefore they were ready for more advanced and complicated grammar rules (Malmberg et al 2000:49-76).

Another aspect of language awareness that is mentioned in the STRIMS project is unconscious learning. As mentioned earlier, students can tell when something is not grammatically correct but they are often incapable of explaining why it is incorrect, and if they can explain it they can not give the grammatical rule for it (Malmberg et al 2000:73). Unconscious learning can be the reason why students know when something sounds wrong. According to Swedish neuro psychologist George Stenberg, this implicit learning has nothing to do with intelligence (Malmberg et al 2000:73).
3. Methods and material

The aim of this paper is to investigate if feedback by underlining can help students develop their proficiency in their use of English verbs. Another aim is to look at the impact of teachers’ feedback on errors.

My investigation was conducted in an upper secondary school in Sweden with students from two classes. The informants were first-year students and both classes had the same teacher. One method this teacher uses in order to have his students improve their grammar is as follows: every second week the teacher asks the classes to write essays. After each time the students have written essays, the teacher collects them and reads them. The teacher underlines grammatical errors, spelling errors and lexical errors but he does not correct them. Sometimes he underlines whole words, as in we are faire persons, or more than one word: it was 58000 in the audience. When the teacher underlines verb errors he underlines the whole word (she have her own apartment) or indicates after the verb that something is missing (she work in the hospital). The teacher knew I was only going to look at verbs in this investigation so in some of the essays when he was short of time he only underlined errors concerning verbs. Some students who made a lot of errors did not get all the errors marked. The teacher feels that if all the errors were marked it would affect the students’ learning process negatively.

When the students receive their essays they are given time to look at the errors and try to correct them. The teacher is there to help them if they are unable to make the corrections on their own and need an explanation. The teacher has never explained to, or told the students the purpose of the essay writing. Therefore the students are unaware that the essays are supposed to help them become more proficient in English grammar. The students never revise the essays and hand them back to the teacher, but the teacher hopes that the students will learn from the mistakes they make in the essays and not repeat them. The disadvantage of writing essays is that it takes a great deal of time for the teacher to correct them, which limits the number of essays the students can write each term.

3.1 Essays

The material in this survey is made up by some of the essays the students wrote this semester, which were subsequently corrected by underlining by the teacher. Errors in all fields (lexical, grammatical etc.) had been underlined by the teacher, although my aim focused on verb
errors. Altogether the students wrote four essays but some students wrote fewer essays because they were absent on some occasions. The ones used in the present investigation were written on four different occasions. The topics varied, some examples of topics were to write about the strangest/best thing that had happened to the students, how they celebrate Christmas, favorite movie, best friend and the like. The participants in the survey were sixteen students, eight of whom were interviewed (class A) and eight who served as a control group (class B). The reason for having a control group was that it could be assumed that the interviews might have an effect on the number and types of errors that the students made in their last essay, written after the first interview.

3.2 Interviews

After the first three essays were written, I conducted an interview with the eight students in class A. The other class worked as a control group and were not interviewed. The purpose of the interview was to see if the students could correct their grammatical errors and see if they understood why they were wrong. After the first interview the students wrote a new essay about how they spend their Christmas holidays and then they were interviewed about that last essay. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, although the subject was English. The reason for that was that I assumed it would be easier for the students to explain grammar rules in Swedish rather than in English. The interviews were performed on two different occasions during the ordinary English lessons, but in another room. The students were interviewed one at a time and the time for the interviews varied depending on how many errors had been underlined by the teacher in their essays.

In the first interview the students were asked if they thought English was a difficult language and if they said yes I asked them what aspects of English they considered to be the most difficult. Second, the students were asked if they were exposed to a lot of English outside of school in movies, TV shows, books and the like. In the last set of interviews they were asked what they thought about their teacher’s method of giving feedback by underlining errors, and the fact that they had to write essays so often. The students were also asked if they thought about the previous errors that had been underlined by the teacher when they wrote the last essay. During the interviews the students were asked to correct and explain their errors. If they were unable to correct an error, the students were asked to read the whole sentence out loud in order to see if that could help them find the error.
Due to the small number of participants it will not be possible to take gender differences into consideration. The students in class A will be compared with those in class B in order to see if the interviews had any impact on the students’ performance. The students’ names will not be mentioned; instead they are referred to by numbers.

3.3 Categorisation of errors

In the results, I have divided all the verb errors in the essays marked by the teacher into the following five categories: subject-verb concord, wrong tense, right tense but the wrong form, unmotivated tense shift, and the –ing form. There were a few instances of errors concerning word order and wrong form of or missing auxiliaries in the students’ essays. Due to the small number of such errors, I therefore decided to exclude them from my results.

The ‘subject-verb concord’ category includes errors where the students left out the third person –s in the simple present tense (he work in; Elvis then walk) or when the students attached the third person –s to the plural (we drives a lot; clothes that looks). The irregular forms are also included in this group (horses has [...]; we was [...]).

The category of ‘wrong tense’ will include errors where the students used the present tense where English has an expression of future (I really hope we _ go there), or where the students used the past instead of the perfect or pluperfect tense (when he_ finished the wine he said to the bartender [...] ). Errors where the students have left out the auxiliary (the phantom _ getting greedy) are also included in this category.

‘Right tense but wrong form’ will include errors that involve the wrong form of irregular verbs (the trip _ooked three hours; the language they spoked in her tribe). Another error that is included in this category is when the tense is right but not the form (after we had eating all the food [...] ).

The category ‘Unmotivated tense shift’ includes errors where the students shifted tense from the present to the past or vice versa (then some friends joined us and we stands and talked [...]; he told the man that he wants the best wine and shifted between different tenses throughout the essay (he was sent to jale [...] Ryan gets out of jale [... ] Ryan got good friend with [...] ).
The last category is the –ing form. Errors that are made in the use of the –ing form are mostly overuse of the progressive (he is playing for Inter in Italy; we are fighting with each other but that is fun). Another error is when the –ing form is used after the infinitive marker to (we used to going to Norway).

Sometimes more errors than one had been underlined by the teacher in the sentences quoted below, as in The most time he spend in his own bed or on the garden; she work at the hospital, there she is a nurse. Errors like on and hospital will not be commented on since the investigation only covers verbs. The example sentences may also contain errors that were not underlined by the teacher and therefore are not underlined in the examples either. Furthermore, I will not deal with errors concerning the wrong choice of verb if the verb form and tense are correct, or the examples where it is difficult to determine whether there is a spelling error rather than an error regarding the form of the verb, e.g. a month earlier I became eight years; we cryed and cryed [...]  

3.4 Delimitations
From the beginning I was planning to conduct at least three sets of interviews with one or two essays written between the interviews. I wanted to see if the students got more proficient after having discussed their errors with me and had had time to think about them. That would have made it possible for me to investigate whether the interviewed students had learned more than the control group.

4. Analysis and results
This section presents the results of the interviews with the students in class A as well as a survey of the number and types of errors made by each student in each of the essays. Furthermore, this section also includes a survey of verb errors made by students in class B. At the end of this section there will be a comparison between the two classes.

4.1 Analysis and results of students A1-A8
The following sections present the results of the students who were interviewed (class A). A survey of the number and types of verb errors are presented in tables, one for each student, in order to see whether the number of errors decrease over time. The tables also indicate how well the students were able to correct and explain the errors that had been underlined in their
essays. Lower case letters are used to indicate students’ responses; thus, $x$ stands for being able to correct and explain the error, $y$ stands for being able to correct but not explain error, $z$ indicates neither being able to correct nor explain the error, and $a$ means being able to explain but not to correct the error.

### 4.1.1 Student A1

Student A1 wrote three of the four essays. There were very few errors in these three essays. This student seems to be proficient over all. The student thinks English is fun but sometimes difficult, especially reading comprehension tasks. She watches TV and movies in English but always with subtitles, and says she does not read many English books.

**Table 1. Survey of results for student A1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$x = \text{being able to correct and explain the error}; \ y = \text{not able to explain but can correct the error}; \ z = \text{not able to explain nor correct the error}; \ a = \text{able to explain the error but not to correct it}$

In the first and second essay the student made no errors concerning verbs. In the fourth essay there were two verb errors. The subject-verb concord error had the wrong form of *be* in the past tense. She wrote [...] *how many days it was to Christmas*. When she was asked to correct and explain the error, she said it should be changed to *were since days are in the plural form*. This is an existential construction, which means needed to change it into *there* as well; otherwise the sentence would still be grammatically wrong. We discussed this but the student did not seem to grasp that she had to change it into *there* as well. The student also wrote *when we __ finished we open our presents*. She could not explain or correct this error. This is one example where the auxiliary verb *had* cannot be left out in English whereas it is possible in Swedish, see section 2.3.3 in the background. In the last interview she said she did not reflect on the feedback she had received on the previous essays when she wrote the last one.

### 4.1.2 Student A2

Student A2 finds English to be a difficult language; reading comprehension in particular. She watches a lot of movies with subtitles.
The student had some problems with subject-verb concord, but she knew how to correct them all. The problem seemed to be that the student mixed up the inflectional ending –s with the plural –s. She wrote sentences such as *he work_ in [...]_; horses has [...]_; we was [...]_ and the like. The errors were very consistent. The student seemed to be aware of the different forms, but mixed them up. In the last essay, she had reduced the number subject-verb concord errors a great deal and said that she had started thinking about the third person singular –s when she writes. She also had some difficulties with tense forms, and wrote most of the past tense by attaching the regular suffix –ed.

4.1.3 Student A3

Student A3 wrote three essays. He made errors in the fields of tense and subject-verb concord. He thinks English is difficult and grammar is what he finds the most difficult to learn. He watches movies and TV shows in English but does not read many books.

This student had some problems with subject-verb concord. Also, in the last essay when writing in the past tense he ended up using the presents tense. The number of subject-verb concord errors decreased from the second to the last essay. There were two subject-verb concord errors in the fourth essay: *there is a lot of lights; we drives home so we drive in the car much on the x-mas evening [...]_. As can be seen in the last example, the verb is wrong the
first time, but when it appears the second time in the sentence the form is correct. The student was able to correct the error immediately and the error was probably more of a ‘slip of the pen’ than an error. When the subject is in the plural, he used the –s form of the verb (we stands and talked; next to us stands two girls). The student was able to correct all of the subject-verb concord errors, but not able to explain them all. He understood the differences between singular and plural but mixed them up. He found it difficult to explain some of the tense errors but in most cases he knew how to change the verb. One problem connected with the past tense was that he put both the auxiliary and the main verb in the past tense, as in I didn’t recognized her; I didn’t said that much. The problem with tense remained in the last essay, but not to the same extent as in the first one, and all three errors were due to the same verb: every year on X-mas morning I got my first present in the morning; when he comes we got presents from [...] there we drink coffee and got presents. After help with the first error he could explain the other tense errors he had made.

4.1.4 Student A4

Student A4 thinks, like some of the other students, that English is difficult. Despite this she thinks it is fun and that it is an important language to know. The student did not make a lot of errors but there were some subject-verb concord errors and some tense errors.

Table 4. Survey of results for student A4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>1x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>2x</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

x = being able to correct and explain the error; y = not able to explain but to correct the error, z = not able to explain nor correct the error and a = able to explain the error but not to correct it

Student A4 had no problems correcting the errors in the first and second essay. The third essay was very short and there was only one subject-verb error which she could both correct and explain. In the sentence we put on traditional clothes that looks very nice, she knew why she should change looks into look but could not explain it more than with “then it must be plural”. She did not know what to do with the tense errors, what to write instead. She had written I really hope we go to the party and she did not know how to correct the sentence.
4.1.5 Student A5

Student A5 thinks English is fun and quite easy. She watches movies and reads English books. She does not think much about former essays and the teacher’s feedback on them when she writes new ones.

Table 5. Survey of results for student A5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>2x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>1x</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

x = being able to correct and explain the error; y = not able to explain but to correct the error; z = not able to explain nor correct the error and a = able to explain the error but not to correct it.

In the first two essays there were not many errors overall and the verb error with the subject concord *the funniest thing that ever happened to me were when [...]* was corrected and explained by the student. She knew that *thing* is singular and therefore it should be *was* instead of *were*. She was also able to explain and correct the errors she made in using the past tense of *speak*. She had written [*...] the language they *spoke* in her tribe and she explained that the suffix –*ed* should be removed since *spoke* is already the past tense form of the verb *speak*. The concord error in essay three (*she also *have* a big test [*...]*) was corrected and explained by the student as well as the two concord errors in essay four.

4.1.6 Student A6

Student A6 thinks English is a difficult language to learn but said it is good to know it. She finds grammar to be the most difficult part. She does not read books in English but watches TV-shows and movies in English with subtitles.

Table 6. Survey of results for student A6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>2y</td>
<td>4x</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>1y</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>4z</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>1z</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1y</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

x = being able to correct and explain the error; y = not able to explain but to correct the error; z = not able to explain nor correct the error and a = able to explain the error but not to correct it.
In the first essay this student wrote there were verb errors in four out of the five categories. She was able to correct the two concord errors (the worst thing that happened to me were [...] and my cousin and I was out [...] ) but she could not explain in any of the cases why she corrected them the way she did. Irregular verbs seemed to be an area where the student lacked of proficiency. She conjugated all verbs as regular: she drived me; we failed; we flyed and she could not correct or explain any of the errors. Nevertheless, in the second essay there were neither errors with irregular verbs nor tense errors. Subject-verb concord errors appeared four times but she was able to correct and explain them all.3

4.1.7 Student A7

Student A7 is a student who made very few errors overall in the four essays. He finds English fun and not especially difficult. He reads English books and watches movies and TV in English.

Table 7. Survey of results for student A7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1y</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

x = being able to correct and explain the error; y = not able to explain but to correct the error, z = not able to explain nor correct the error and a = able to explain the error but not to correct it

As mentioned earlier and as the table shows, this student did not make a lot of errors. The only two he made were (Elvis then walked) and ([...] all the things that was on the signs) and these he was able to correct but not to explain. He said in the last interview that he acknowledges the feedback he has received on the previous essays and has that in mind when he writes new ones. The fact that the student was unable to explain the errors can be due to unconscious learning. As mentioned in the background section 2.4.2, students learn by implicit learning and that is why they can tell when something sounds right or not but are unable to explain why. Out of the four essays he wrote, only two of them had some underlining from the teacher. This student made very few or no errors in the other fields such as lexical errors, spelling and the like.

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3 The student did not participate in the last interview; therefore there is no information on whether she is able to correct and/or explain the errors in essay no. 4.
4.1.8 Student A8

Student A8 finds English fun but thinks it is difficult to learn the different forms of verbs, among other things. She watches a lot of English movies with subtitles but hardly reads any books in English.

Table 8. Survey of results for student A8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject-verb concord</th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1z</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>1z</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The student was able to correct the concord errors she made in the first essay: it was a very steep hill, but me and Erika ___ very brave at that time but she could not explain why it should be were instead. She believed it had to do with the tense of the verb rather than concord. In the same essay she had conjugated the irregular verb hurt by attaching the regular –ed ending: hurted. She could not explain or correct the error. The error concerning tense where she had written: if something bad ___ happened to one of us, is always the other one ___ there to support was difficult to explain for the student. She tried different theories but could not really find the answer she was looking for. In the last interview she had no problems explaining and correcting the concord errors.

4.1.9 Summary of results

The results of this investigation show that the students who acted as informants in this particular study did not make many errors concerning verbs in general. The most frequent errors in class A involved subject-verb concord and tense. The students were able to correct and/or explain the subject-verb concord errors 45 times out of 49, or in 92 percent of the cases. Only in 2 cases of the 49 errors could the students neither correct nor explain the errors. This shows that the students have a good understanding of subject-verb concord although they have a problem applying the rule accurately in their writing.

The second most common error is tense. The students made 24 errors in this area, mostly with future and the perfect/pluperfect. The students were able to correct and/or explain 19 errors out of 24, or 79 percent.
The students did not make a lot of errors with irregular verbs; only 6 errors are made with irregular verbs. The students were only able to correct and/or explain two out of the six errors. Sometimes the students conjugated the irregular verb correctly but attached the regular verb ending –ed as well. Some of the students knew that the errors had to do with the fact that these verbs were irregular verbs and two of the students admitted that they could not conjugate irregular verbs. The students knew, in Swedish, that some verbs were irregular and referred to that in Swedish.

Unmotivated tense shift occurred in eleven cases. The students used the past tense and then shifted to present tense in most of the cases, but there are also some examples where they began writing in the past tense and then shifted to the perfect tense. Five of the students made errors with unmotivated tense shift and as many as four of them were able to correct and/or explain the error.

The fifth type of verb error that was investigated was the –ing form. Most of the –ing form errors were due to overuse of the progressive aspect and only one student was able to explain but not to correct one of the two errors she made. Altogether the students made 5 errors due to overuse of the progressive aspect and although the students could not explain the errors they could correct them.

4.2 Analysis and results of students B1-B8

The tables below will contain a survey of the number and type of verb errors made by the students in class B. These students were not interviewed, but they received the same type of teacher feedback as the students in class A. Like the students in class A, the class B students made mostly subject-verb concord errors. 35 out of 70 errors were concord errors. 7 errors involving the –ing form were made altogether in the students’ essays.

4.2.1 Student B1

Student B1 wrote three essays and the number and type of verb errors varied. It appears as if the number of subject-verb concord errors decreased during the essay writing process. One error the student made with overuse of the progressive form was that he wrote he is playing for Inter in Italia. This is not something on-going and therefore one should not use the progressive here.
Table 9. Survey of results for student B1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject-verb concord</th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Student B2

Student B2 only wrote two essays and they were written at the beginning of the term. The errors mostly concerned the subject-verb concord, but there were some errors in tense and the use of the –ing form. The subject-verb concord errors seem to be due to a mix-up between the singular and the plural: *I were so happy; Wednesday [...] were our day; he feel* and *Max were*. In this particular case, it is also possible to suspect that *were* is a transfer error from the Swedish equivalent *var*. In the second essay the student continued to have problems with tense and wrote: “*the angel of musik*” who *she thinks her father have sent from haven*; *But the opera singer quit and Cristin takes her place and Christin have’nt seen “angel of musik” before*. There are also a few errors with the –ing form and they are both due to overuse of the progressive: *From this moment strange things starting to happened*. Here, the student used both the progressive form and the past tense. In *the phantom (angel of musik) getting greedy and wants Christin for himself* the student had left out the auxiliary.

Table 10. Survey of results for student B2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject-verb concord</th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.3 Student B3

Student B3 made one subject-verb concord error in the first essay: *the room were very small*. In the second essay there were also subject-verb concord errors like: *the bohemians thinks ; she discover that and it is a musical so they sings a lot*. In the final essay the student only has
one subject-verb error: When we have got our presents, when are opening them and gets happy. These errors are similar to those other students made and the student attached the third person –s with the plural –s instead of the third person. Furthermore, the student made one error with irregular verbs in the first essay (the trip tooked three hours). This is the result of an overuse of the regular verb rule since she has both conjugated the verb as an irregular verb and attached the regular –ed ending. She made the same error in the second essay when she wrote: But the duke has fallen in love with Satine. The problem this student had with tense was that she did not conjugate the verb when she wrote in the past tense: he is suppose to start [...] when she discover that he is just a poor writer she gets very disappointed.

Table 11. Survey of results for student B3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.4 Student B4

Student B4 wrote three essays and the second essay contained errors of tense and subject-verb concord. The subject-verb concord errors the student made were very similar to the ones the other students made: she don’t want anything to do with him; his family adopts him and there is much complications and misunderstandings. In the second essay the students switched between different tenses a number of times. She started to write in the past tense (he was sent to jule; he got a really good layer), but then she switched to simple present tense (he returns home and realise; the layer adopts him). After a few sentences the student once again switched to the past tense: the layers son and Ryan got good friends [...] Ryan also got to meet the neighbours. However, the third essay has no errors related to verbs; instead the teacher had underlined spelling errors like: I’m not shore of what I will continue to read when I have gratued. She also has one lexical error (maybe start a café [...] in Spain [...], that’s one plane). She has taken the Swedish word plan and turned it into an English-sounding word. This can be compared to the example of lexical transfer in the background section 2.1.2.

Table 12 Survey of result for student B4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.5 Student B5

In students B5’s essay it is difficult to see whether the teacher feedback has been useful to the student or not, since the errors are so evenly spread out. In the first essay there were quite a few errors related to tense, whereas there were no other verb errors. The tense errors this students made were that he used the simple present tense instead of changing it into the past tense (before he came in to the bar he throw the banana skin; he told the man that he wants the best wine; while the bartender pour the wine and when he get outside the door […]). In essay two there were no verb errors, the teacher has mostly underlined preposition errors (I saw it in the cinema; he went in jai; the man trained him with marsall arts). The students also had some spelling errors which the teacher had underlined: their he took over his fathers company; […] and went in to deffit criminals.

Table 13. Survey of results for student B5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.6 Student B6

In student B6’s case no errors were made in the two first essays, but in essay number four there were a total of four errors concerning verbs. It is impossible to draw any conclusions as to what might be the reason for this. A closer look at the essays shows that the three texts are almost equally long; the student did not seem to have been stressed while writing any of the essays since the handwriting is the same throughout the essays and all three essays were written in the past tense. The student seems to have quite a good vocabulary in all the essays as well.

Table 14. Survey of results for student B6
4.2.7 Student B7

Student B7 shows the same pattern as student B6, but only subject-verb concord errors occur in the student’s fourth essay. In the second and third essay only spelling errors are underlined by the teacher and both those essays are written in the past tense, which can be the reason why the student did not make any subject-verb concord errors. In the final essay the student used the simple present tense and made a lot of subject-verb concord errors (we head off to the kitchen and makes breakfast; at this hour my mom and dad has allready been up for several hours; my grandma and grandpa comes together with one of my sisters: we all sits down and chats; then there is Donald Duck and friends; we watches it [...]; and takes a little nap; me and my nephew eats it and we starts to search for our presents. Since this essay was written in the simple present tense and the others in the past tense it can be assumed that the large numbers of concord errors are due to this. When the students wrote in the past tense she did not have to think about the third person –s and could then avoid these errors.

Table 15. Survey of results for student B7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.8 Student B8

The errors in students B8’s essays vary. In essay number one and three there were no tense errors, whereas in essay two and four there were two such errors: after we had eating all the food; When the Santa is flying away with his sleigh in the “Santa workshop” at TV I felt it is real Christmas. Below essay number two the student had written that he was feeling very tired and promised to do better next time. The second essay was not very long, about 75 words, and the errors in the essay were related to tense. The first one (when I woked up [...])
shows that the student has first conjugated the verb correctly as an irregular verb but then attached the regular past tense ending –ed at the end. In the final essay the student made one subject-verb error (when the Christmas day come I’ve been very excited).

Table 16. Survey of results for student B8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Comparison of the two classes

Table 17 Survey of the errors in classes A and B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Class A</th>
<th>Class B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb concord</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong tense</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right tense but wrong form</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmotivated tense shift</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The -ing form</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number in brackets indicates how many students in each class wrote the essay

For both classes, the most frequent error was concord errors. In both classes, all the students made at least one concord error in one or more of the essays. The eight students in class A had ten concord errors altogether in essay number one and eleven errors in the last essay. The six students in class B who wrote the last essay made six concord errors altogether in essay one and thirteen errors in essay four. One reason why the number of subject-verb concord errors is so different between the essays can be due to whether the student wrote the text in the first or third person, or used the past rather than the present tense.

The second most common error in both classes was tense errors. Most of the essays were written in the past tense since the students were often asked to account for something that had happened to them.
The students did not use many irregular verbs in their essays but when they did the irregular verbs appeared to be a problem, and they neither seemed to be aware of which verbs are irregular in English nor how to conjugate them. Some of the students said during the interviews, that when they did not know the right form of the verb they chose another verb they knew was not completely accurate but one that they knew how to inflect.

The errors regarding the –ing form do not appear very often. Köhlmyr says that errors occur when the simple present is replaced by the progressive –ing form, which is predictable since Swedish has no equivalent form. In her study, 94 percent of the errors she called incorrect mix-up are when the progressive is used instead of the simple present (Köhlmyr 2001:233).

One of the general questions the students in the A class were asked in the last interview was what they thought about writing essays every other week. All of the seven students interviewed agreed that they had become more proficient and skilled writers. Three of the students said that when they wrote the new essay, they did not reflect on the received feedback. Instead of thinking about their previous errors, they simply wrote “what sounds most correct”. The other four students said that they took the earlier comments into consideration when they wrote the fourth essay. As mentioned in the background section, many teachers encourage students to use the implicit approach to grammar acquisition. The teachers want the students to draw their own conclusions based on the input they get from their teachers. This shows that most of the students used the implicit method when they wrote their essays and should be regarded as a success for the teacher.
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5. Summary and conclusion

Because there were so few errors in the essays concerning verbs along with the fact that not all students wrote four essays it is not really feasible to compare the total number of errors made by students in the two classes. The fact that the students wrote about different topics in different tenses also makes it difficult to compare the essays. It is also difficult to analyze the progress of each student individually. What kinds of errors the students made depends on the subject of the essay, the length of the essay and the tense used. In some essays the students wrote only three or four sentences and did not make any verb errors, while other students wrote a whole page or more. The students had some problems with the simple present tense, both with subject-verb concord and the overuse of the progressive. When the students wrote their essays in the past tense they had some problems with irregular verbs and sometimes they also switched between the past tense and the simple present tense.

If I should do this investigation again I would do some things differently. First, I would have started to collect the essays earlier. There are always students who miss class, lessons are cancelled, teachers and students are ill and other things. All these factors take valuable time from the investigation and need to be taken under consideration. Second, I would have decided what topics there should have been for the essays. Then I could have chosen topics that made the students use different tenses, and made sure there would be narratives both in the first and the third person.

Since eight students in class A but only six students in class B wrote three or more essays it is not easy to draw any conclusions about how much they improved. More informants and longer time are required in order to get reliable data. Nevertheless, most of the students I
interviewed said that they had understood the underlined errors and thought about them when they wrote the following essay. They also mentioned that they thought about what we had discussed during the interview and applied that in the essays writing.

In the first interview with class A I asked the students if they thought English was a difficult language to acquire. All the students but one said that at least some things in English were difficult, such as listening comprehension and grammar. This is a bit surprising since there seems to be a general belief that students find English to be an easy language to learn. I thought that the only student who did not think of English as difficult would be able to explain the errors he had made in his essays. It was interesting to discover that this student was the only one who could not explain the errors he had made. On the contrary, the data showed that student A2 who made the largest number of errors, a total of 28 errors, was able to explain 89 percent of her errors and another student was able to explain all the seven errors she had made. The student who could correct 89 percent of all her errors had a lot of subject-verb concord errors in the first two essays. She had mixed up the third person verb ending with the plural ending of nouns and consequently got the verb forms wrong. In the last essay she only made one subject-verb concord error, which one can see she corrected herself right after she had written it. When I asked her in the last interview about this she said that she thought about all the errors that were in the first essay. She remembered what we had talked about and tried to apply that in the last essay.
References


