The weak language learner

- a study of ways of taking weak language learners into consideration in class

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Abstract

English is taught as a compulsory second language in Swedish schools and is one of three core subjects needed to be passed in order to receive a leaving certificate. Statistics show that 6.9% of the students do not acquire proficiency enough to receive a G (pass) in English in grade nine. The aim of this study is to investigate to what extent weak language learners are considered in the English classroom and if compensatory aids are used to further support their learning conditions. The method used for the study is qualitative interviews which were semi-structured. Four interviews with English teachers were conducted within the same municipality.

The result shows that there are aspects that can be considered in order to provide better opportunities for weak language learners within the English classroom as well as outside the English classroom. Some teachers find it difficult to separate lack of motivation from lack of knowledge which makes discovering the students as early as possible important. In the English classroom weak language learners can be supported by smaller discussion groups since one problem seems to be oral skills. A connection to Swedish can be observed and students with difficulties in reading and writing in their native language experience more problems when learning English. The interviewees state the importance of first focusing on oral skills in the target language, before introducing written skills.

Regarding support outside the English classroom the investigation shows that optional English, parents and homework are important features. In the optional English class weaker language learners get an opportunity to speak and revise previous blanks of knowledge. Parents are important for showing their children that they find English important but also for supporting the children while doing homework.

Concerning compensatory aids, most teachers did not use them nor had they knowledge enough about available aids. The most frequently used aid was a CD where texts are recorded.

Keywords: weak language learner, foreign language learning, learning difficulties.
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Appendix 28
1 Introduction

English is the mother tongue or official language of a large number of countries, covering many different cultures, and is the dominant language of communication throughout the world. The ability to use English is necessary for studies, traveling other countries and for social and professional international contacts of different kinds (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2000:1 [www])

English is taught in many countries around the world as a first or second language. In Sweden all pupils begin to study English during the early compulsory school years. However, some students have difficulties in achieving the goals in English needed to finish school with a leaving certificate. The Swedish curriculum clearly states that knowing English is important; this makes this area worthy of studying.

Previous research has shown that students with difficulties in learning a foreign language are much disregarded in the classroom situation (Rubin & Thompson 1994:10; Lightbown & Spada 2006:54ff). Most students are taught in a similar manner where learning styles and strategies are not taken into consideration (Littlewood 1998:1f; Rubin & Thompson 1994:26). Teachers are not always aware of why different students perform poorly or what learning strategies and styles they use. Moreover, teachers are not always conscious of what can be done or what compensatory aids exist.

The initial aim of this study was to compare how students in Sweden and South Africa were treated regarding these matters, since English is taught as a non-native language in both countries. However, this appeared to be impossible since the South African schools I visited looked upon the students as a whole group rather than as individuals with individual problems and needs. Furthermore, South African teachers cannot fail a student in a particular subject; all students are transferred to the next grade.

Since comparison is impossible the aim of this study was changed into investigating how some teachers in Sweden regard and work with students with difficulties in acquiring English as a foreign language. More specific research questions are:

a) What are the teachers’ perceptions of weak language learners’ characteristics?
b) What methods do the teachers use to improve the students’ learning conditions?
c) What compensatory aids are used to improve learning conditions?

2 Background

English is one of the core subjects in Swedish compulsory school together with Swedish and math. A core subject indicates that all students are supposed to pass this subject in order to obtain a leaving certificate. Nevertheless, many students fail to do so, even though they
struggle hard. There has not been much research carried out regarding students who fail in foreign language learning but master other subjects in school (Hansen 1990:4). This can be compared to the other two core subjects, math and Swedish, where a lot of research has been carried out (Gustavsson 2002:59, 64; Hammarbäck 2002:27).

Previous evidence of learning disabilities may cause problems when learning a foreign language which Ehrman (1996:267) states as being “a notoriously unpromising combination”. However, not only those students with diagnosed learning disabilities contend with difficulties. Estling Vannestål (2002:49) points to the fact that students with foreign language background are overrepresented when it comes to difficulties in acquiring English. Cajkler and Addelman (2000:5f) further suggest that all students ought to be given opportunities to learn a foreign language regardless of their abilities as foreign language learners. Students benefit from learning more about new ways of communicating as well as widening their views on other cultures.

2.1 The Swedish national curriculum and the syllabus for English

According to the national curriculum for the compulsory school system, Lpo 94, “education should be adapted to each pupil’s circumstances and needs” (The Swedish National Agency for Education 1994:4 [www]) and the school has furthermore a “special responsibility for those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set for the education” (ibid:4). Furthermore, the curriculum also informs that the school ought to stimulate all individuals to acquire knowledge and to create good conditions for all pupils (ibid:7). The curriculum states goals to strive for, such as – “learning to communicate in foreign languages”, and goals to attain, such as – “communicating in speech and writing in English”.

An important aspect is that the teacher ought to start from each individual’s “needs, circumstances, experience and thinking” (ibid:13). The English syllabus (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2000:2f [www]) further states the aims that students should have attained by the end of the fifth and the ninth year in school. By the end of the ninth year students should, for example, understand clear speech, be able to take part in discussions, relate and describe something, choose and use appropriate aids, and understand and reflect upon how they learn English. According to the curriculum (The Swedish National Agency for Education 1994:17f [www]), the head of each school has to make certain that teachers and students receive all the needed help and assistance to ensure that each and every one of the students achieves the goals that are to be attained.
2.2 “The good language learner” and “the weak language learner”

In 1975 Rubin (Brown 2007:132) coined the expression “the good language learner” describing him or her in terms of personal characteristics, styles and strategies. Good language learner qualities are described by several authors (Cajkler & Addelman 2000:70; Harmer 2001:42; Lightbown & Spada 2006:54; Brown 2007:132), and some typical qualities are: ability to work independently, creativity, ability to make intelligent guesses, creating opportunities to practice, making the errors work for you and not against you, and ability to use contextual clues. Is it then possible to reverse the qualities of a “good language learner” in order to understand what forms a “weak language learner”? Estling Vannestål (2002:47) introduces this thought in her article on students with difficulties in English.

Cajkler and Addelman (2000:97) mention the expression “underachiever” as a way of expressing a student who has difficulties in understanding the target language without the support of visual aids.

2.3 Motivation and anxiety

A common factor that interferes with language learning is lack of motivation (Ehrman 1996:137). According to Harmer (2001:41), motivation can be reduced by predicting the student’s aptitude to learn a foreign language. Aptitude tests measure each student’s ability to learn a foreign language by testing the student’s capability of detecting spelling clues, grammatical patterns and memorizing words. The idea of giving students aptitude tests was at its peak during the 1950s and 1960s (Brown 2007:105f). If the teacher gives the student an aptitude test, the teacher will unconsciously bear the result in mind while teaching the student. The test might end up being a self-fulfilling prophecy (Harmer 2001:41).

By setting assignments at an appropriate level for each student, the teacher can enhance the student’s willingness to learn, whereas failure in an assignment will reduce the student’s aptitude to commit to studying (Harmer 2001:7). Littlewood (1998:53ff) mentions two aspects of motivation that are more crucial than others: communicative need and attitude. If learners feel the need to gain knowledge of how to communicate in a foreign language, they will become more apt to study and will therefore put more effort into the work. Ganschow et al’s (1998:248ff) research shows that poor attitude and low motivation are the cause rather than the result of language difficulties.

Harmer (2001:72) states that many weak language learners cannot see other areas of using the target language apart from the learned context. This idea is also confirmed by Hansen (1990:51) and Estling Vannestål (2002:50) who state that many weak language
learners cannot see other fields of application for English, but its use in class. Furthermore, if their attitude is favorable they are also more likely to pursue additional contacts with speakers of the foreign language and the culture associated with it, accordingly enhancing their learning. Equally important as motivation is anxiety, or rather the lack of anxiety. Krashen (Lightbown & Spada 2006:37; Brown 2007:295) claims with his “affective filter hypothesis” that a learner who is tense, anxious or bored cannot assimilate new knowledge despite the fact that the input is at a correct level for the student. Littlewood (1998:58f) similarly points to the fact that students who are exposed to an environment in which they feel insecure or anxious are likely to experience psychological barriers to communication; this will further affect their abilities to learn.

Students are often asked to perform individually in front of the class and are then subjected to criticism regarding pronunciation. Unless the student’s self-esteem is firm this is a difficult situation. However, for most students a certain amount of anxiety is stimulating but the optimal level is complicated to estimate (Lightbown & Spada 2006:61).

### 2.4 Style and strategy

Learning style is the way of learning which differentiates individuals from others. Every person is more apt to learn in certain ways, for example visually or orally. Learning strategy is the method used to successfully master a specific assignment (Harmer 2001:118).

According to Ehrman (1996:xiii), there are three main reasons that affect language learning – affective factors (like motivation and feelings), learning style and learning strategies. Ehrman (ibid:xii, 7) also claims that “mismatches” often cause problems for students who are learning a foreign language. A mismatch is when the student’s learning style and the teacher’s teaching method do not match. Most students can comfortably vary between different learning styles although they have a preference for one. However, rigidity in learning strategies and styles are often good indications of who will experience difficulties in learning languages (ibid:54).

Wenden and Rubin (1998:15f) suggest that successful language learners use better strategies and approach the tasks in a way that promotes success. Weak learners often have poor strategies and give up easily when they meet resistance. Lundahl (1998:54) therefore suggests that it is important to build upon the students’ previous knowledge, and then suggest additional strategies to cope with the assignments.

However, Littlewood (1998:1) states that students react to the instructions given in the classroom by what he calls the “main actor” – the teacher. If the teacher uses a specific style
when he or she teaches it might only suit some of the students in the class, which implies that teachers must be aware of this and adapt their methods to enhance learning for everyone.

Many teachers believe that the students’ problems are rather problems caused by previous teachers or by problems within the student. They are not conscious of the fact that teaching methods within the classroom play an important role (Hansen 1990:18f).

2.5 Native language problems

In 1989, the term *Linguistic Coding Differences Hypothesis*, LCDH, was introduced by Ganshow and Sparks (Ganschow et al 1998:248). They had found that skills in the native language like phonological/orthographic, syntactic and semantic skills rigorously affected the ability to learn a foreign language.

Good foreign-language students perform better in oral as well as in written contexts in their native language than weak language learners. Furthermore, students who are able to compare syntactic-semantic structures in their native language are more apt to succeed in language learning. Palladino & Cornoldi (2004:138) have observed the fact that children with problems in their native language have more problems learning a foreign language. Ganschow et al (1998:249f) have likewise observed that weak language learners show notably weaker skills regarding their native language than stronger language learners. This can also be proven by the grades received by the language learners; good grades in the foreign language connect closely to stronger native language skills (ibid:250). The fact that reading ability is closely connected to the ability to learn a foreign language is noted by Lundahl (1998:18, 26f) who points out that problems of that kind may cause difficulties since weak language learners pay more attention to details rather than to the context.

Palladino & Cornoldi (2004:138) continued by making comparisons between memory and knowledge of first and second language vocabulary. The study showed that problems are related not only to foreign language learning problems but also to native language phonological problems. Littlewood (1998:62f) points to the fact that the ability to learn languages is related to cognitive ability, but even more to language aptitude. Language aptitude is the ability to identify words, remember sounds, memorize words, recognize how words function grammatically in sentences and how to construct grammatical rules from language examples, previously discussed in 2.3.

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1 By phonology is meant the sound units that form words, and by orthography the rules that decide the correct spelling of words. Moreover, syntactic skills refer to the ability to use the grammatical rules to form phrases or sentences, and semantic skills are the understanding of the meaning of words (The Longman Dictionary 1995).
2.6 Supporting teaching strategies

Previous research has shown that there are some things that can be done in order to support weak language learners’ conditions. Hansen (1990:36) points to the fact that weak language learners find it hard to understand spoken language, but still they enjoy the English classes more when the teacher speaks English while in the classroom. However, since many of these students struggle with low self-esteem and anxiety discussions in small groups are to be preferred rather than discussions in a large class (Harmer 2001:115).

Ehrman (1996:181) suggests that it is important to help students find their own learning styles and strategies by using metacognitive strategies. By that expression she indicates that each student needs help from the teacher in order to find a good strategy for him or her, and furthermore understand why that particular strategy works for the individual.

These are some of the “Common Approaches to Work with Learning Disabilities” suggested by Ehrman (ibid:282):

- Working with the learner’s strengths and avoiding reinforcing failure
- Making heavy use of advance organizers\(^2\) to help the student organize his or her time and strategies
- Working on one problem at a time
- Giving plenty of time
- Providing as much close structuring as the learner seems to need
- Reminding the learner of a strategy as often and as long as necessary
- Calibrating the “chunks” to the learner’s intake capacity
- Presenting learning material in a variety of different ways
- Practicing and even over-learning
- Increasing the time used for a task
- Encouraging the use of technology
- Recognizing and discussing the nature of the individual’s difficulties with him or her

Rubin and Thompson (1994:9, 70f) similarly conclude that practice and revision are important and different learning styles and strategies ought to be used. The authors (ibid:50) further point to the fact that it is important to show learners areas outside the classroom where the target language can be used (also cf. the findings of Hansen (1990:51) and Estling Vannestål

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\(^2\) An advance organizer is a way of helping the student to structure previous knowledge in order to add and interpret new information more easily, for example mind-mapping or thinking-trees.
Lundahl (1998:22f) suggests that it is important to help weak language learners to pre-comprehend areas that are to be discussed in class. Lundahl (1998:56) remarks that the effects of learning problems can be reduced if support is offered early on. In the investigation carried out by Estling Vannestål (2002:50) a common feature of weak language learners was that additional support in the target language had been offered late, mostly during the eighth or ninth grade in school. According to her this might depend on the fact that grades are not given until grade eight.

2.7 Compensatory aids

In order to provide better conditions and opportunities for weak language learners compensatory aids can be used (Estling Vannestål 2002:56). In 2005 Läsutveckling Kronoberg at Växjö University created a CD-ROM that introduces different compensatory aids that can be used by students with learning difficulties. The most common compensatory aids that are used for language learning are translation pens and dictionaries on computers. When using a translation pen the word is scanned and the translation is given immediately on the screen of the pen. Some pens also have a speech synthesizer which enables the student to hear the word or the sentence that has been scanned. Dictionaries on computers provide both translations of words in running text and synonyms in the target language. There are also speech synthesizers which read the text on the computer screen out loud and word processing programs that help the user to improve grammar and spelling. A compensatory aid that is available at many schools and libraries is recorded books; some books are available to use with an MP3 or an iPod, others only as CDs (Läsutveckling Kronoberg 2005). Another possibility is mind mapping programs that help students who have difficulties organizing their work to structure information (Läsutveckling Kronoberg 2005).

3 Method and material

The method chosen for this essay is qualitative, more in-depth, as opposed to the quantitative method where a large number of data is collected and analysed.

3.1 The qualitative method

When using the qualitative method one can conduct a more detailed study of a smaller area using either unstructured or semi-structured interviews (Bryman 2002:300). The unstructured interview can be based on one single question where the interviewee is allowed to answer
freely, whereas the semi-structured interview is more prepared with some kind of script. The interviews that were carried out for this study were semi-structured, and an interview guide was used (see the appendix). The interview guide illustrates a number of themes that were covered during the interviews.

Some of the advantages of using a qualitative method are the possibilities to ask follow-up questions in case something needs clarification, that the discussions can be deepened, that thoughts and opinions are allowed to be discussed and that the questions can be adapted to better suit each interviewee. Bryman (2002:302) states that semi-structured interviews are flexible and that the main thing is that the interviewees understand the questions asked and that they are able to explain patterns and behaviours.

3.2 The interviews

The selection of interviewees was made with no regards to representativity. As a result of this fact no generalizations can be made (Bryman 2002:99). One of the interviewees was chosen because the teacher was my supervisor during some of my teaching practise periods. The rest of the teachers were chosen only because of the connection to the municipality in which that specific teacher works. The only requirement was that all teachers had some experience and that they were teachers of English as a foreign language, or remedial teachers.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish to enable all teachers to speak freely with no language barriers. Quotes used in the essay were translated by the author. The interviews were conducted individually in either staffrooms, classrooms or in a home environment. All interviews were tape-recorded with a dictaphone and notes were taken simultaneously during the interview to indicate especially interesting passages when needed. A total amount of six hours recorded material was obtained during the interviews. The material was carefully listened to several times and some passages were transcribed in order to be quoted.

3.3 Presentation of the teachers

At the beginning of each interview the teachers were told that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that their names and the name of each school were to be kept anonymous. In order to fulfil this guarantee the teachers have been given aliases with initial letters A to D.
3.3.1 Alice

Alice, who received her teaching qualification in 2003, works at the secondary level at a school in a small town. The school is an F-9 school (pre-school through grade nine) with approximately 600 students. She mainly teaches English to grade six, seven, eight and nine although she is further qualified to teach Swedish. Alice was the youngest teacher interviewed with the least experience of students with difficulties in learning English. Alice produces her own material and rarely uses course books.

3.3.2 Beatrice

Beatrice received her teaching qualification ten years ago. She teaches Swedish and civics to lower grades but she has also eligibility to teach English. Beatrice works at an F-9 school situated in a rather small municipality. She has previously worked in a large city and is used to working with students with different kinds of problems. At this school her English classes are mainly focused on teaching small groups of students with difficulties.

3.3.3 Carol

Carol received her teaching qualification more than twenty years ago and has spent her entire teaching career within the same municipality. She has taught upper secondary students and secondary students in Swedish and English. Carol has always been interested in students who have difficulties at school, and her position includes part time special tuition. She works at an F-9 school. Carol was the most experienced ordinary teacher regarding special needs education of the interviewees.

3.3.4 Daphne

Daphne received her teaching qualification nearly thirty years ago and she began by teaching grades four, five and six. Later on she extended her qualification by studying more English to be able to teach at secondary school. Daphne teaches at an F-9 school that works thematically; all subjects are included in each theme. The school is situated within the same municipality as the other schools. This school has a large variety of nationalities among the students which distinguishes it from the other schools.

3.4 Problems and limitations

One of the major problems in conducting the interviews required for this essay was finding teachers to interview, especially remedial teachers. Some teachers who were asked initially could not find enough time in their hectic schedules. However, those that were eventually
interviewed were enthusiastic and found the topic interesting. One of my initial aims was to see if and how remedial teachers cooperate with English teachers in order to support weak language learners. This aim had to be abolished since I was not able to find a remedial teacher willing to be interviewed. One remedial teacher who was asked wanted time to prepare for the interview which was an impossible request since none of the other teachers were given that opportunity.

Furthermore, some teachers felt that they were being evaluated while they were interviewed. This was definitely not my intention. However, since interviewing and asking open questions is hard to master, this might depend on my not being experienced enough.

Another problem that occurred was that one of the teachers asked to have the interview guide beforehand. After having discussed this matter with my supervisor I decided against having it sent to her since I had already performed one interview and wanted the research procedure to be the same with all the interviewees.

As mentioned above this is a small study which makes it impossible to generalize. However, the interviewed teachers shared how they look upon the problem and their opinions on the matter. Since all teachers work within the same municipality, they also share the same local work plan which might indicate that their views were similar.

4 Results and discussion

In the following part of the essay the results of the interviews will be described and analyzed. The results are divided into five subsections: Characteristics of the weak language learner, Possibilities in the English classroom, Possibilities outside the English classroom, Compensatory aids and Early help. The sections sometimes intertwine which was impossible to avoid since the interviews covered several areas at the same time.

One of the questions in the interview guide was to estimate how many students in each school had difficulties to learn a foreign language. The answers varied from 8% to 20% of the students in each grade. These figures show an even more disappointing reality than the figures Hansen came up with in 1990 where she estimated that 10% of the Swedish students had difficulties with foreign language learning (Hansen 1990:9).

More recent figures (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2006 [www]) show that 6.9% of the students who finished grade nine in 2006 did not pass English. However, that figure does not account for all those who have difficulties with language. The least experienced teacher Alice was the one who estimated the lowest percentage, 8%. This is quite interesting: is the ability to see difficulties something that you learn gradually and are you
only able to see the most obvious cases at the beginning? Carol on the other hand was frustrated by the fact that nowadays she found many more students with difficulties when they reach grade seven than before. Her own conclusion was that many schools use an exploratory way of working with learner autonomy (see 4.1.2) and this does not suit all learners, particularly not weak ones.

Daphne, who has very long experience of teaching, estimated that about 10% of the students had problems. However, in her view the variety of levels is greater nowadays. There are weaker students today, but there are also many students with excellent skills, students that could not be found twenty years ago. A teacher interviewed in a local newspaper points to a similar observation at the school where she works:

They have more pre-knowledge when they come here. They are chatting and playing games on the computer /…/ and they watch a lot of TV [my translation].

(Cederholm 2003:4)

She concludes likewise that individual differences are greater today.

4.1 Characteristics of weak language learners

What distinguishes a weak language learner according to the interviewed teachers? Are there certain criteria that have to be fulfilled? Do the teachers’ ideas correspond to what is suggested in the literature? This section aims at clarifying these questions.

4.1.1 Weak language learners’ features

From the interviews two main criteria could be observed. All the interviewed teachers mentioned motivation as a strong contributing factor and they also mentioned the connection to problems with Swedish – the students’ first language.

According to Alice the main distinguishing mark is lack of motivation. This applies not only to those who are weaker language learners, but to the group as a whole. She also finds that it is hard to separate students with lack of motivation from those with lack of knowledge:

When someone sits slouching without doing anything, it’s hard to know whether he doesn’t want to or doesn’t know how to.

This is a problem that affects most teachers with no regard to subject. Does the student lack motivation since he or she lacks knowledge likely due to difficulties from previous studies, or, can it be the other way round (cf. Ganshow et al 1998:248ff)? In Alice’s opinion some
students prioritize other subjects to perform better there instead of putting even more effort into foreign language learning.

In Beatrice’s point of view the problems are much linked to problems with learning Swedish. She can draw parallels to reading difficulties and reading comprehension in Swedish. She also finds that a general interest in learning languages is needed when you study. If the students lack motivation the learning process is much harder and much more difficult.

Carol states that there are several aspects that need to be considered and that the mixture of students is heterogeneous. There are students who have not cared from the beginning and when the difficulties then escalate, the barrier to cross becomes more and more difficult. The students realize that they are too far behind and everything collapses. This often co-occurs with the ability to read and write Swedish. If they are late readers and writers the students have great difficulties to keep up with the class when learning English (cf. Läsutveckling Kronoberg 2005). Their first language has to be well established before the second language can be fully introduced according to her:

It is not unusual that weak language learners are more successful with their third language since it is introduced some years later when the structures of the native language are well established.

Still, she also mentions some other groups like students from homes with no, or little, tradition of studying and the most difficult group, students with little ability to succeed in theoretical subjects in general.

Daphne finds that weak language learners often have difficulties in more or less all types of subjects, Swedish as well as math. If the students have difficulties in reading, the problem can be seen in all subjects since this particular school works in themes where all subjects cooperate. However, since she works at a multicultural school many of the students learn English as a third language. In some cases this causes problems but no generalizations can be drawn from that according to her. Estling Vannestål (2002:49) points to the fact that for various reasons some students with a foreign language background are more likely to experience problems with language learning than those with a Swedish background.

A very interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the interviews is that the more you have worked with students with learning problems the clearer the connection to the mother tongue seems to become. If the students lag behind during the early years of school, problems are more or less inevitable when learning a new language. If the students know how to
express themselves in their first language they do not have to struggle with these problems as well, when learning a second language.

None of the teachers mentioned characteristics such as the students’ ability to relate English to areas out of school, and poor or unvaried learning strategies. These characteristics were brought up by Estling Vannestål (2002:48f) and by Hansen (1990:51) in their studies. However, the teachers were not explicitly asked about this. Most likely the teachers would have experienced at least some weak language learners with such problems, if asked.

4.1.2 Discovering the students

Why are not all students with learning difficulties discovered early on, or how is it possible to complete five, six or even seven years of schooling before difficulties are realized? Alice is aware of the fact that one of her classes includes several students with difficulties. The class already has many resources allocated to them. Since her students were identified prior to grade seven her main target is to improve the conditions for those who still remain in the English class. Beatrice similarly points to the fact that some students are hard to discover since they are quiet, but it is very important to act as soon as one discovers them.

As stated above Carol is shocked by the number of students that is discovered at the beginning of secondary school. Her conclusion is that this has to do with the learner autonomy used in many schools today. Students search for information on the Internet to obtain knowledge and this enables the weaker learner to cooperate with more proficient students and is therefore not discovered earlier on. Good language learners can cope with individual tasks whereas weak language learners lag more and more behind:

Compulsory school of today works well for most learners, however, weaker learners need someone to tell them what to do. Previously, those students were helped by the lectures the teachers had, they could sit and absorb new knowledge like mushrooms.

The intention of letting students work independently is the fact that they can work on the same task but with dissimilar demands for the individuals according to each student’s ability. However, since weaker learners demand more structure and support they cannot always keep up with the pace of the rest of the class. Reorganizing the school in this manner was an attempt to provide better conditions for weak learners, but, instead many of these students experience more difficulties today compared to when the teacher gave lectures in front of the class (cf. Estling Vannestål 2002:48). Previously weaker learners were able to concentrate on listening instead of trying to cope with structuring their own learning.
Another reason for not discovering the weaker students may be the lack of tests in primary school. More of the school activities are focused on social cooperation and the first actual test most students are given is the national test in grade five. However, since some teachers look upon these tests as nothing but an indication for the entire group, information may stay behind with the previous teachers and not be passed on.

Daphne notes that the results of national tests are not always thoroughly analyzed by the teachers in grade five. This fact in addition to not passing the information on to the next teacher may unfortunately cause another semester’s struggle for the weak language learner, whose additional support will be delayed since the new teacher might not observe the student’s needs for some time.

4.2 Possibilities in the English classroom

Are there specific methods that can be used in the English classroom? The interviewees work in similar ways sometimes and differently on other occasions.

4.2.1 The main problem – oral or written skills?

In Alice’s opinion the most problematic part of English for weak language learners is the oral part. The students feel insecure, uncomfortable and uncertain when they have to speak in front of their class mates. Pronunciation mistakes can cause scornful laughter, which unavoidably affects self-esteem.

Carol and Daphne also find the oral part the most difficult for the students. Daring to speak is difficult for most weak language learners. The students can answer simple questions but not speak freely. However, the most important part when regarding the goals to achieve is the fact that they can make themselves understood. Daphne finds that the students need to know every single word of a conversation or a text, in order to answer a question or come up with a statement, which has also been confirmed by Rubin & Thompson (1994:30f). In other words they remain silent, not to be embarrassed by saying something incorrect. Students with difficulties in learning English are quiet, almost invisible in a full class according to the interviewed teachers.

Beatrice, on the other hand, who mostly teaches in primary school, finds that her students typically have problems with the written parts, whereas the oral part comes more natural to them and is easier to work with. She consciously works with her students to build self-esteem and they talk a lot about all people’s differences:
It is strange though, the students have less and less linguistic instinct... It should increase since they watch TV and play computer games. Anyway, the students enjoy talking.

It is more or less impossible to evaluate a student who does not say anything. The ability to create a climate within the classroom that is friendly and supportive must be one of the targets for any teacher, but especially for teachers of languages since the students’ oral skills are being evaluated. If the students are not given opportunities to express themselves, their language learning will not develop. However, it might be possible to merely master the written language, but that is neither what the curriculum (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2000:1[www]) nor the syllabus for English (The Swedish National Agency for Education 1994:10 [www]) state.

If students are to be able to speak freely within the classroom, teachers have to be supportive and encouraging from the beginning. Most students with learning difficulties are aware of the fact that they differ in some way from other students. Still, the teachers must make sure that everyone receives the attention and support needed. Carol mentioned that she spends more time doing social activities than actual language teaching nowadays. The fact that many weak language learners experience anxiety is probably one reason for this. If the students feel comfortable it is more likely that they will perform better.

4.2.2 Facilitating within the English classroom

Students can be supported in many different ways within the English classroom. Alice lets the students work in small groups, mainly for oral exercises. She divides them into groups no larger than four students in each group. Since she produces her own teaching material she is able to use articles at different levels of difficulty on the same topic. By doing this she can discuss a specific topic knowing that most students can take active part. She also supports the weaker language learners by getting them started on projects, or by giving them extra tuition structuring their work:

The especially troublesome part for weak language learners is to limit the topic and get started.

The primary-school teacher, Beatrice, states firmly that it is good to begin early on with English, but, in a playful manner – singing songs in English and speaking about colors. She claims the importance of taking advantage of the love first graders have for new knowledge:

Children love to be able to say something in English, it makes them feel grown up and skilled.
According to Beatrice it is very important that the written parts are excluded for several years. By acting like this the students become used to hearing English and they are exposed to the language for more years. Weak language learners are also given some more time to improve their first language before the written parts are introduced. Beatrice further argues that it is important to speak English as much as possible. If the students hear the target language a lot they are more apt to understand oral exercises and express themselves. Hansen’s (1990:36) study further confirms that the more the teacher speaks English the more the weaker language learners appreciate the classes.

Beatrice produced her own teaching material when she had recently received her teaching qualification. However, she realized after a few years that course books in general are well organized and produced with thoughtfulness, which has made her reconsider her previous actions and she uses textbooks more frequently now. To further support the students who find a certain aspect troublesome they receive extra support when, for example, talking in front of the class. She makes the rest of the class aware of the particular problem and by doing so the students become more sympathetic. In her view, most students are well aware of other students’ strengths and weaknesses, so why hide them? They continuously discuss in class that someone is good at handicraft while someone else is good at football, math, storytelling or English. If weaknesses are hidden at all times, then you have ensured your students that they are something bad, something to be ashamed of.

Carol speaks English during her entire classes. This might be the only time each week that the students hear English, which makes it very important to make the most of the opportunity. To hear and revise are the most important parts of learning English according to Carol. An example of a typical lesson would for Carol be text job. She has become more and more fond of CDs in the English classroom and uses them to have her students imitate. The entire class listens to a sentence and repeats it out loud, and afterwards the class discusses the text. In her view this is especially important for those with difficulties: the possibility to hear and repeat the sentences but also to receive a translation to understand the contents.

Daphne likewise speaks English during lessons. Only for very specific reasons is Swedish allowed. She focuses on the students having understood the context rather than specific words. The lessons are not planned to suit the weak learners but all tasks can be individually adapted. Since her school works thematically all students are given the opportunity to practice English additionally to the scheduled English lessons. They work with what they call plannings. A planning is a pre-planned task that the student has to complete...
individually. All the plannings have different levels of difficulty which makes adaptation to each individual easier. Every student has to complete a certain number of these plannings each week.

Daphne’s aim is that everyone in the class should say something in English during every lesson. In order to fulfill this aim she lets her students work in pairs writing dialogues on a specific topic often connected to the course book. This encourages especially the weaker language learners to take active part and they become more involved although they sometimes copy what their partner has written. They always perform the dialogue in front of the class or in front of a smaller group.

The fact that many weak language learners find it hard to keep up with the pace of a normal lesson makes it hard for the teacher. If the education is set at a level adapted to weak language learners, the good language learners become bored and might end up disrupting the class since they get too much spare time. Another aspect that has to be considered is the size of the classes. Is it possible to give individuals different treatment? If the number of weak language learners is 20%, the top figure estimated by my interviewees, then there are still 80% who demand education that is more challenging. The teacher has to consider all students in each class, treat them individually, a tremendously hard task since the number of students is often near thirty.

An advantage can be observed with teaching material produced by the teacher of the class. The material can be adapted according to the levels of the students’ knowledge. It is a time consuming method but appreciated by the students. All students can feel more involved and the weaker language learners may experience that they can actually use their knowledge to something connected to reality (cf. Estling Vannestål 2002:53).

The teachers interviewed did not discuss different learning styles or strategies much within the English classroom. This is interesting since research shows (cf. 2.4) that students learn in different ways. The only one who mentioned it was Carol who reads irregular verbs in different rhythms. She mainly does this to enlighten the students’ day, to make a boring task more fun. However, the students enjoy it, and are furthermore exposed to a learning style that is apt to enhance the learning for some of them.

4.2.3 Streamed education or heterogeneous classrooms?
Streamed education occurs when the students are grouped according to ability and motivation to succeed in a particular subject. Twenty years ago all students in secondary school had to choose between a general and a specific course in math and English. The general course used
to attract students with low motivation as well as students with problems learning a foreign language. The specific course attracted highly motivated students and the learning climate was good. Since the general course had a mixture of students with different kinds of problems, much time had to be spent on solving conflicts and quieting students, rather than focusing on language learning. The benefactors were the students in the specific course where no or little interruption harmed the language learning. Carol and Daphne were the only teachers who had experienced streamed education in English. However, Daphne has never taught streamed education since she worked at primary school at that time.

According to Daphne when you work with a mixed group of good language learners and weak language learners, the good ones bring the weaker ones along and raise them to a higher level. The weaker learners also get a chance to see that other students find English important and this causes them also to increase the amount of time and effort put in. This exemplifies what the GEM study\(^1\) (Eriksson & Lindbladh 1987:59, 129f,) referred to as the “role-model hypothesis”. However, streamed education is not always a positive thing. A “weaker” group may reinforce the poor strategies of the group when the group is not exposed to the good strategies of more proficient learners.

Carol points out that it is important to see that other students perform well and that they are focused on the subject while in the classroom. But she also states that this only applies to those with normal or good self-esteem. If the self-esteem is low the student’s main focus during class will be “not to be seen, heard or noticed”.

Streamed education was more or less abolished from Swedish schools for a decade because of the results of the GEM-study (Eriksson & Lindbladh 1987:327f), but is slowly making its way back again. Like Carol and Daphne state, weaker language learners perform better with good language learners, but who considers the good language learners (See also discussion 4.3.1)?

### 4.3 Possibilities outside the English classroom

Apart from the fact that the students can be supported within the classroom environment there are ways to support weak language learners outside the regular English classroom.

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\(^1\) The GEM-study was the final report from a project on how to group students in math and English in secondary school.
4.3.1 English as a language option and special education

When students begin grade six or seven, depending on how the particular school is organized they are given a choice to study German, French, Spanish or optional English. At Daphne’s school all students are encouraged to choose a third language. The reason for this is that some students have developed further at this stage and can succeed in a third language although they have proved themselves weak language learners regarding English studies. After a semester some of the students realize that they benefit more from optional English and transfer to that class. At Alice’s, Beatrice’s and Carol’s schools the students are not particularly encouraged to make a choice of a new language. It is a choice they have to make in cooperation with their parents and their previous teacher.

The main target for optional English is to make English comprehensible and enjoyable for the students. Daphne and Carol who are the only interviewees that teach optional English, adapt the level to that of the weakest language learner. On several occasions the level of English is grade four whereas the students attend grade seven. When the students feel that they understand their self-esteem increases and this makes it possible to deepen their knowledge.

In the optional English class all the weak language learners are given a chance to improve their written performance, but the main focus is on the spoken parts. Everyone speaks English and the students are not as intimidated as when they are in the ordinary class:

If it hadn’t been for optional English it would have been impossible to grade most of the students. They say absolutely nothing in their ordinary classes, but there, when we are in a small group, all of them speak. (Daphne)

Carol uses the time with the smaller group to help the students find techniques to study and learn English. When the students find an appropriate technique she tries to increase the speed of the areas that have to be covered by grade nine.

4.3.2 Parents

According to Carol and Daphne parents are extremely important when it comes to succeeding in a subject, even more important if the students have difficulties. Carol states that the importance of committed parents cannot be emphasized enough:

If committed teachers are important to weak language learners – that is nothing to the importance of committed parents.
Daphne firmly states that students who experience that their parents find English important are more apt to pass the course. On most occasions she feels that parents are interested in becoming involved if they feel that they can make a difference:

If the student can see that the parents find English important, we are halfway there.

However, it is not always easy to be a committed parent. Students tend to criticize their parents since they do not express themselves exactly like the teacher, and they do not ask exactly the same questions as the teacher would have done. In order to provide as good conditions as possible Carol presents the same type of homework every week, a text which is supposed to be retold by using main words and underlined sentences in that particular text to be learnt by heart. Parents of weak learners are introduced to what is supposed to be accomplished every week at a meeting, which enables the parents to support their child more easily. For some students it is enough to remind them of the homework but for others more cooperation has to be offered by the parents.

Carol further points to the fact that it is more difficult to involve parents with no or little tradition of studying. A reason for this might be the parents’ bad experiences of education as well as not enough knowledge about the importance of revising much to become more proficient. This type of parents often find it easier to help their children with for example math, where the result can be observed immediately, whereas in English you might not see a result until the students receive a specific grade in grade eight or nine.

Since a semi-structured interview guide was used, the question of involved parents was never asked in the interviews with Alice and Beatrice. However, they meet the parents of the students twice a year when discussing the mandatory individual development plan.

4.3.3 Homework

As mentioned above Carol has discovered that the easiest way for weak language learners to do homework is to stick to one specific method. All her students are supposed to spend a certain amount of time, equal for all students, doing homework. The task for everyone is to retell the story by using main points and learn the sentences underlined (cf. section 4.3.2 above). Students that are proficient also learn the words in the wordlist, just in order to stick to the aim of spending an equal amount of time on homework. Since the structure is similar every week all students know what to do and they also know how to proceed when they begin. According to Carol this has turned out really well. Since all students have to learn the
underlined sentences by heart, their vocabulary expands over time though they have not spent time learning actual words.

Daphne gives more varied homework. It can vary between texts, words, irregular verbs, writing activities or something connected to the activity book. She also has a similar viewpoint to what Carol states: homework should be equal, not the amount but the effort put into it. If the students have words for homework they are allowed to choose how many words they wish to learn.

Beatrice sometimes gives oral homework to the weakest students. Their task for next class might be to listen to the text while reading simultaneously in the course book. She finds it more important that they get the opportunity to hear English rather than struggling with writing.

4.4 Compensatory aids

This was by far the topic that was most difficult to discuss. Clearly the teachers interviewed were not very interested in compensatory aids, nor very aware of what can be provided.

When asked about compensatory aids Alice responded by saying “How do you mean?”. Beatrice stated that computers are “her weak point”. All the interviewed teachers seemed to have little experience and knowledge of compensatory aids that can be used in school.

However, one thing that came to mind for all of the teachers was computers and computer programs. A computer seems to be something scary and almost dangerous. In addition, computers need to be booked in advance in many schools since there is a limited number of available ones in every school. The programs for computers are not always easy to master for the teachers, and students are often more experienced in utilizing the mechanisms of the programs, an intimidating factor for many teachers, as illustrated by the following quote from the interview with Carol:

“Oh, there is much on the computer, oh, but I’m not very familiar with that.
Not good enough either”

Alice and Daphne mention the possibility for weak language learners to borrow laptops to be used in the classroom and at home. However, this possibility is only an option for weak learners who have been evaluated by a remedial teacher. Ordinary teachers cannot ask for such service for their students. Daphne also mentioned the translation pen. Similarly to laptops it is only accessible for students that have been evaluated and perhaps received a diagnosis like dyslexia.
When Carol uses the computer it is mainly to write words or sentences. Many students have poor handwriting, and neat wordlists is a way of facilitating for them in order to learn correctly spelt words. Another reason for using computers is variation, simply making the class a bit more fun. In her point of view there are more programs to work with if the problem is difficulties in Swedish. She further points to the fact that “weak language learners look for contact with others”, which makes her prioritize communication rather than the students sitting in front of computers.

After having considered compensatory aids for a while all of the teachers realized that they use different kinds of aids. Alice produces her own teaching material and she makes sure that there are texts and exercises in the material that are more suitable for weak language learners. She also encourages them to listen to the text several times. If the class reads novels or short stories, books at different levels of difficulty are always provided. Beatrice for example uses easier course books and CDs where the text has been recorded. If weak language learners are helped by having CDs at home, they are allowed to copy them. She also mentioned a new course book with a CD-ROM included with games, grammar exercises, and possibilities to train vocabulary. This course book was new and she had not had the opportunity to try it yet.

The fact that the teachers all worked within the same municipality may be a factor to take into consideration. If compensatory aids are not discussed by the members of staff and heads of schools, then it is up to the individual teacher to come up with ideas and ways of working with compensatory aids.

4.5 Early help

All four teachers agreed that acting immediately when a problem is found is essential: the sooner, the better. If assistance is given early on, the student can regain knowledge and confidence more easily and the students also have more time to reach the goals to be achieved by grade nine.

However, Alice, Carol and Daphne claimed that receiving extra help in English is very uncommon (cf. Hansen 1990:43). In primary school the main target seems to be additional help in Swedish and math. This is of course important as well but the weak language learners benefit from extra help in English too. Not until the student reach grade seven do they have an option to choose extra English as a language option in Modern Languages. Furthermore, it is also easier to involve parents from the beginning if the parents become aware of the problem at an early stage.
None of the teachers said that they cooperate with remedial teachers. However, more cooperation seems to exist between the ordinary English teacher and the optional English teacher. A common approach during optional English classes seems to be to prepare students for what is going to happen during the ordinary English class (cf. Lundahl 1998:41f).

5 Conclusion

In every group of English students there is at least someone who has difficulties in learning English. However, not much research has been carried out in Sweden regarding weak language learners and how they are taken into consideration in class, despite the fact that 6.9% of all Swedish students finished grade nine without a grade in English in 2006 (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2006 [www]). This fact makes the particular area worth studying and the essay worth reading for language teachers and language teachers to be. Hopefully they can get some ideas of what can be done to improve the learning situation for weak language learners.

The investigation was carried out using in-depth interviews with four teachers in a small town in Sweden. Since only four teachers were interviewed no generalizations can be made, although some tendencies can be shown. A semi-structured interview guide was used which enabled the interviewees to develop and clarify ideas and explain statements more in detail when needed. A strength with recorded interviews is that you can listen to the interviews several times. However, a weakness is that you might misinterpret answers when you listen to and transcribe the recorded material.

Another way of carrying out the investigation could have been as a quantitative study, where a great number of teachers had responded to a questionnaire. An advantage of a quantitative method would have been a larger basis to draw conclusions from, and also teachers representing more schools and other municipalities.

The teachers interviewed were interested in the topic, which is a strength of the material. However, this is also a weakness since teachers that were not interested in weak language learners might have dissimilar views on weak language learners, and how to improve learning conditions for that particular group of students.

The results of this study indicate that the variation of proficiency skills is greater than before. There are students with excellent skills who use English in school as well as outside school for example when playing computer games, watching TV or chatting. However, there is a large group of students who needs to put a lot of effort into learning English.
It might be difficult to distinguish students with lack of motivation from those with lack of knowledge. Many students who have struggled hard for several years to learn English find it difficult when they realize that they lag more and more behind their classmates. This is difficult for the student, as well as for the teacher who has to consider all students in the class. But what is the cause and what is the effect? Is the cause lack of knowledge which then yields the effect of low motivation? There is no clear answer to the questions. However, as a teacher you have to evaluate each student to determine the cause and the effect in order to give appropriate support.

It was interesting to discover that finding students with problems in secondary school is a fairly recent dilemma. Before, teachers were more aware of students with difficulties since the students worked individually rather than in groups; a quiet child in a group might be a weak child, but it does not have to be that way. Furthermore, weak language learners often need more help to structure their work and to get started. Since work in groups with more proficient learners is common their lack of skills becomes invisible and harder to evaluate. One way of putting the teachers’ attention to the problem is grades. If you have to evaluate every student and pinpoint his/her knowledge the teacher might become more aware of each student’s weaknesses and strengths. Most students change teachers after grade five or six since most schools are divided into primary and secondary schooling. The national test in English could, or rather should, be used as an indicator for succeeding teachers, but is not. Moreover, the results of the tests could be more thoroughly analyzed and more discussed at the shift of teachers.

Many weak language learners have difficulties expressing themselves orally. They tend to disappear in the ordinary English classroom. This is troublesome since the oral part is something that is to be assessed for a grade in English. However, by dividing the class into smaller groups in order to support weak language learners their anxiety can be reduced and they receive more opportunities to speak. Still, the weak language learners prefer when the teacher speaks English within the classroom, which all of the interviewees do.

In order to support weak language learners outside the English classroom there are some areas that seem to be especially important: optional English, the students’ parents, adapted homework and early help. Optional English gives the weak language learner an opportunity to revise previous knowledge by starting at a lower level and slowly advancing towards better proficiency. This is where the students get an opportunity to speak – and they do, according to the interviewees. Involved committed parents are extremely important as well. When the students feel and realize that their parents want them to succeed, they tend to perform better.
The parents also play an important role when it comes to homework; some extra support does make a difference. Considering homework, the teachers stated that all students are to spend an equivalent amount of time doing homework. It is better for the weak language learner to do one part of the ordinary homework well, rather than nothing at all.

Early help can make a difference. If students receive extra support from a remedial teacher early on, or rather as soon as problems are recognized, it is easier for the weak language learner to regain confidence and lose anxiety. When students are supported in order to find their best style and strategy to learn, it is possible for them to follow their ordinary class again.

The result indicates that compensatory aids are used in schools, but not to a large extent. The most common aid is a CD with the text recorded. Computers are used as well, but the teachers seem to have little knowledge about existing programs, and they also seem to prioritize communication with the students rather than focusing on computer assisted learning.

One aspect some of the teachers stressed was the connection to Swedish. If the students have difficulties in Swedish, with reading and writing, this seems to be closely connected to difficulties in acquiring a foreign language. The interviewees claimed that it is important that the first language is well established before you start reading and writing a new language. Still, it might be a good idea to start introducing the new language early so that the children have an opportunity to acquire some English in a playful manner.

To conclude, it seems that the aim of this study has been reached, but, it would be interesting to deepen the study by interviewing students with difficulties in acquiring English as a foreign language. Do their experiences of the learning situation correspond with what the teachers claimed? Moreover, it would also be interesting to focus on the cooperation between English teachers and remedial teachers, perhaps by accompanying a group of weak language learners during a semester to observe their progression in class.
References


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Appendix

Intervjuguide

The aim of this study is to see how some teachers in Sweden treat students with difficulties in acquiring English as a foreign language. More specific research questions are:

a) What are teachers’ perceptions of weak language learner characteristics?

b) What methods do the teachers use to improve the students’ learning conditions?

c) What compensatory aids are used to improve learning conditions?

- Jag heter Susanna Axelsson och går på lärarutbildningen vid Växjö universitet. Just nu läser jag min femte termin av totalt nio. Min inriktning kommer att vara engelska och matte.
- Intervjun genomförs som en del av en C-uppsats i engelska, som också kommer att tillgodoräknas som mitt examensarbete.
- Syftet med min uppsats är att belysa att det finns många elever som har svårigheter att lära sig främmande språk inom allmänhet och engelska i synnerhet. Det finns väldigt lite forskat om detta.
- Kortfattat beskriva varför och hur respondenten har valts ut för en intervju. Eftersom jag tidigare gjort vfu i denna kommun kändes det naturligt att i första hand söka upp skolorna här.
- Deltagandet är frivilligt.
- Kommer att utnyttja alias för att inte kunna identifiera intervjuade lärare.
- Min e-post om du vill klargöra något ytterligare.
- Kan jag kontakta dig om jag behöver?

Personliga fakta frågor

Ålder?
Lärarexamen, när?
Var jobbat? Olika skolor? Stadier? Ämnen?
Berätta om din nuvarande skola.

”Svaga elever” – elever som har svårt att lära ett andra språk

Berätta om hur det ser ut på den här skolan.
Hur många per årskurs?
Vilka är det, eller rättare sagt vilka anledningar finns det till att ha svårt att lära ett andra språk?
Vad karakteriserar eleverna?
Om du bortser från de elever som fått någon form av diagnos, vad är största problemen för dessa elever?
Vad gör att de inte klarar målen?
Vilka mål mer specifikt klarar de inte?
**Undervisningssituationen**

Hur gör du när du undervisar? Berätta om en helt vanlig, typisk lektion.

Vad påverkar i undervisningssituationen?
Hur agerar eleverna i klassrummet? Varför då?

Vad kan man som lärare göra för att underlätta inlärningen?
När/hur får/begär man hjälp? Av vem?

Vad känner du att du kan göra?
Vad känner du att du är skyldig att göra?

**Hjälpmedel**

Finns det hjälpmedel?
Vilka?
För vem?

Speciallärare?

*Kan du förklara ytterligare? Kan du ge exempel?*  
*Kan du fördjupa ditt resonemang? Hur?*  
*Varför? När?*  
*Menar du…? Var?*  
*Jag förstår inte?*