Honest mistakes

-A study of grammatical mistakes in Swedish pupils’ production of oral English, with a focus on grammar teaching.

Anna Rosén
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Abstract:
When speaking a language, whether it is our first or second language, grammatical mistakes will be made. The aim of this essay is to look into what kinds of mistakes some Swedish learners of English make when speaking English and to analyze why these mistakes are made. The essay also aims at looking into what grammar teaching can look like in Sweden and how some teachers look upon their students’ oral proficiency.

The method used for this study was a qualitative one, namely interviews. Twelve students, eight in grade seven and four in grade nine, and two teachers were interviewed. During the interviews with the students a dictaphone was used. When interviewing the teachers notes were taken, and these have been the foundation of the analysis.

The results showed that many of the mistakes made by the students seemed to originate in transfer from their first language. Preposition mistakes, for instance, were made in 20% of the cases and they mainly originated in interference with their first language.

Verbs turned out to be the area where most mistakes were made, followed by prepositions and pronouns. 50% of the mistakes made by students in grade nine were verb mistakes, whereas the students in grade seven made verb mistakes in 33% of the cases.

This study further shows that the teachers had a good grasp of what their students know, and do not know, but there were some mistakes the learners made which the teachers did not mention. Finally, the study showed that spoken language is in focus within the classroom. Students are allowed to make mistakes, even though the interviewed teachers find grammar important.

Keywords: Second language learning, grammar teaching, error analysis, English oral proficiency
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1 Introduction
It is a common fact that Swedes are known in the world as good English speakers. We are constantly surrounded by the English language, but we are not as much required to speak the language as we are to listen to it.

However, the syllabus for English in Swedish compulsory school suggests that pupils should “develop their ability to actively take part in discussions and written communication, express their own thoughts in English, as well as understand the views and experiences of others,” and “develop their ability to use English orally in different contexts (…)”. Furthermore, it is stated that at the end of year nine students should be able to take part in a discussion, and orally describe what they have seen, experienced or heard (The Swedish National Agency for Education [www]).

This essay investigates the mistakes some second language learners in Sweden grade seven and nine made when speaking English, and compares the actual performance of the students with the perceptions of their teachers. The aim of the essay is to study what mistakes are made by some Swedish learners of English, and also to study in what ways grammar can be taught. The research questions are:

- What kinds of grammatical mistakes do the students make when using English orally? Are there differences between grade seven and nine in terms of frequencies and types of mistakes?
- Why do they make these mistakes?
- How well do the mistakes correspond with the teachers’ ideas of what their students know?
- What does the grammar teaching look like? Where does the main focus lie?

My hypothesis was that the pupils did not speak as good English as their teachers thought they did. This is because my experiences from school (both as a teacher-trainee and a pupil) are that spoken English is not in focus as much as the written language is.

2 Background
There are not many studies that look into the spoken language of Swedish learners of English. The main focus has been on written language, and in some cases both spoken and written language (Köhlmyr, 2001:22). However, many of these studies have concentrated on the grammatical errors these learners make, in written and spoken language (ibid:23).
2.1 The Swedish syllabus

The Swedish Syllabus for English for compulsory school suggests that the subject of English aims at providing students with an ability to communicate in various ways in English (The Swedish National Agency for Education [www]). The first goal to aim at in the syllabus is that students should “develop their ability to communicate in English in writing and in speech”. They should also be able to express themselves with “variety and confidence”. At the end of year nine students should be able to actively take part in discussions about familiar things. They should also be able to orally describe something they have experienced.

Moreover, it is suggested that Swedish students are much exposed to English outside the classroom; a lot of culture from the English-speaking world is easy to take part of in Swedish society. The subject of English aims at giving the students a broader understanding of what they see in their everyday lives.

The ability to master the form of a language, i.e. its vocabulary and grammar, is part of the communicative skills the syllabus aims at. To form linguistically coherent utterances is also a part of language competence, and the students should be able to use strategies to express themselves, i.e. paraphrasing, body-language and similar strategies, when they feel that their own language ability is not sufficient.

2.2 Communicative competence

The term Communicative Competence (CC) was first coined by Dell Hymes (Brown 2007:220), who claimed that CC is what makes us able to convey messages through language. However, this term has sometimes been interpreted as simply “making yourself understood” with no regard to either correctness or grammar. Yet, CC is far more complex than that. Brown (ibid) gives an explanation where CC is divided into subsections:

1. Grammatical Competence. The knowledge of grammar, the competence used to understand the linguistic codes within a language. It is thus the knowledge of words, syntax and the rules of morphology.
2. Discourse Competence. The competence we use to make sense of sentences, “to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances”.
3. Sociolinguistic Competence. The knowledge of different sociocultural rules, the understanding of when certain forms of the language can be used and when they can not.
4. **Strategic Competence.** The ability to express ourselves even when we do not know the exact words. It is the ability to paraphrase, use body-language and other kinds of compensatory strategies.

### 2.3. Communicative Language Teaching

In many parts of the world the most common way to teach languages nowadays is probably Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which aims at giving the students a communicative competence, as previously explained. Brown (2007:18) suggests that CLT is many teachers’ catchphrase when it comes to language teaching. CLT is mainly a reaction against the method predominating for many years, the *Grammar Translation Method*, and is to some extent a blend of previous language methods. The Grammar Translation Method is a method where many grammatical rules are to be learnt by heart. There is also a focus on written language rather than on spoken language. However, it is often suggested that this method does not give the second language learners a lot of knowledge of how the target language is actually used for communication (Yule 1996:193).

Many teachers nowadays do not use particular *methods* in their teaching to the same extent as they did some 50-60 years ago. There is awareness amongst teachers that there is no specific method one can use in order to achieve a specific result. However, many teachers will use different *approaches*. They are aware of the fact that both they and their students are unique, and thus know that there is not only one way that works in every situation (Brown, 2007:18).

Furthermore, Brown (2007:109) claims that many teachers confuse CLT with the exclusion of grammar teaching whereas Cajkler and Addelman (2000:110) suggest that grammar teaching can be divided into formal and informal grammar. Formal grammar means that the teaching is structured and the teacher explains rules and structures of the language which helps motivated learners to plan their own learning. Informal grammar, on the other hand, will give the students an opportunity to use the language in authentic situations (see further section 2.4).

Johnson and Morrow (1981:64) suggest that one of the criticisms to CLT is that the students are encouraged to communicate, even if it is not correctly done. This idea can be regarded as a misinterpretation of Communicative Competence. Teachers may allow their students to make mistakes thinking that these mistakes are “trivial”, and that the communication itself is the one thing that matters. However, Johnson and Morrow (ibid:65) state that “trivial” errors are not always trivial; if the students are allowed to make too many
mistakes their development will be slowed down. Moreover, students may be thrown into activities that they are not prepared for and when they are trying to express themselves mistakes are made. However, the willingness to express oneself is a very important feature of language learning, and it is important to remember that very few learners will reach the knowledge of a language where they can express themselves correctly in every situation. What Johnson and Morrow suggest is that students should not be allowed to make too many mistakes, but should not be corrected too much either. The allowance of mistakes will slow down their learning development, and overcorrection will make them feel insecure and less willing to communicate.

2.4 Form focused instruction

In defining Form focused instruction (FFI), Brown (2007:73) refers to Spada who stated that FFI is “any pedagogical effort used to draw a learner’s attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly”. As mentioned above (2.3) several approaches are described as; one is the explicit side with metalinguistic explanations and discussions about rules or exceptions. On the other hand implicit approaches exist; “incidental references to form” (ibid: 276), i.e. noticing which means that the learners should pay attention “to specific linguistic features in input” (ibid), and grammar consciousness raising, which is “incorporation of forms into communicative tasks” (ibid).

Brown (2007: 277) further states that there are a number of different error correction types, or feedback types. These different categories look as follows:

1. **Recast** which means that the teacher reformulates a wrongly formulated sentence, as an answer to what the student has said. S: “I lost my road” T: “Oh, you lost your way”.

2. **Clarification Request**: A request for a reformulation or repetition, for example when the teacher asks the student to repeat what he or she just said. S: “I is tired” T: “Come again?” S: “Uhm, I am tired”

3. **Metalinguistic Feedback**: The teacher gives an explanation or a question regarding the utterance the student has made: T: “Remember what we said about the past tense in English”.

4. **Elicitation**: The teacher helps the student to correct him- or herself: S: “He are nice” T: “You mean ‘He…’” S: “He is nice”.

5. **Explicit Correction**: The teacher points out the incorrect utterance to the student and then provides him or her with the correct form. S: I is 15 years old. T: No, that is not how you say it, you say: I am 15 years old.
6. **Repetition:** The teacher repeats the sentence the student has said, and corrects it. The student corrects the sentence as well. S: I is 15 years old. T: I am 15 years old. S: I am 15 years old.

However, error treatment does not appear to be especially effective when the main focus of a classroom is put on it. It seems to be the most effective when it is included in communicative and learner-centred tasks. Brown (ibid:279) suggest that the feedback, or correction, should come after the task in order to help the students as much as possible.

The conclusion Brown (2007:280) draws is that learners will construct a system for the language they are learning. This system is sometimes referred to as *Interlanguage* which means that one is “in between” two languages, and thus learner language is not just regarded as a faulty system but a developmental stage. Teachers need to give learners optimal feedback in order to help students develop their system toward near-native proficiency.

### 2.5 Different ways of teaching grammar

When it comes to teaching grammar one can choose to do it in several ways. Lightbown and Spada (1999:118) suggest that there are a number of different approaches to learning a language. The first approach is the “Get it right from the beginning”-approach, which is an approach with emphasis on spoken language, but where the students rarely get to use the language spontaneously. The reason why the proponents of this method do not want their students to talk spontaneously is because it would allow them to make errors. An example of how this approach is used in the classroom is when the students repeat sentences the teacher has uttered.

The second approach suggested by Lightbown and Spada (1999:122) is the “Say what you mean and mean what you say”- approach. This approach “emphasizes the necessity for learners to have access to meaningful and comprehensible input through conversational interactions with teachers and other students”. When students engage in meaningful activities it motivates them to talk, and the will to talk makes them acquire the language forms. An example of how this approach is applied in the classroom is when the teacher asks the students to talk about how they are feeling today.

The “Get it right at the end approach” is related to the previously mentioned approaches, but its proponents also advocate the importance of some Form Focused Instruction. Much of the target language will be acquired if the students have access to meaningful input and are motivated, but some of the rules simply need to be explained. If, for example, the students
have the same mother tongue and make the same kind of errors because of negative transfer (see 2.6.2), this needs to be explained by the teacher (1999:141).

2.6 Error analysis
Brown (2007:257) claims that errors or mistakes are important to analyze. By doing this we obtain information on how languages are acquired.

2.6.1 Error vs. mistake
Brown (2007:257) claims that a distinction can be made between *errors* and *mistakes*. Mistakes are performance errors, made by everyone, both native speakers and language learners. When attention is called to the mistakes they can often be self-corrected. Brown further states that mistakes are “the result of some temporary breakdown or imperfection in the process of producing speech” (ibid). This breakdown is what results in mistakes. An error, on the other hand, is “a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, which reflects the competence of the learner (ibid:258). For instance, if a learner says “Does Frida can play handball?” one can assume that the learner does not have the competence of using the auxiliary verb *do*.

Moreover, Brown (2007:258) suggests that it is not always easy to tell the difference between a mistake and an error. He states that errors cannot be self-corrected, whilst mistakes can and this ought to be the easiest way to tell the difference. Yet, if a speaker does not correct him-/herself spontaneously, we will not know if he or she has the competence or not.

2.6.2 Transfer and generalization
When people learn a new language they tend to apply grammar from a language they already know to the new language. This tendency is what is commonly known as *transfer*, something that Whitney observed in 1881 (Odlin, 1989:36). Odlin divides transfer into different categories, with subordinate categories. These categories look as follows:

I. Positive Transfer
   II. Negative Transfer
      A. Underproduction
      B. Overproduction
      C. Production Errors

*Positive transfer* means that similarities between the mother tongue and the second language will make the learning of the second language easier. For example, if the mother tongue has
the same word order as the target language, this will be easier to learn than if the word order had been different. Negative transfer is, as the lists above indicates, divided into three types, starting with underproduction which means that the learners will learn a few structures of the target language, and use them, but avoid using structures that are different from the ones in the mother tongue. Overproduction on the other hand can be seen as a “consequence of underproduction” (ibid:37), where the learners tend to overuse norms from their mother tongue. This occurs, for example, when Japanese learners of English say thank you too much, since it is common to say thank you in Japanese. Production error is, for example, when a learner makes a direct translation from the mother tongue, shown by the example of a Spanish student saying the porch of Carmen, when the correct version would be Carmen’s porch (ibid).

Brown (2007:102) too brings up the concept of transfer in relation to interference and overgeneralization, as problems for second language learners. He suggests that these three terms are not three completely different things because they all emerge from the same phenomenon: “the interaction of previously learnt material with a present learning event” (ibid). Transfer is, as already mentioned, applying rules from the first language on the second language. When this results in correct language, it is called positive transfer. Interference, on the other hand, is also referred to as negative transfer; when the transfer results in incorrect language. Brown (2007:104) states that transfer and interference are emphasized in the classroom since they are such obvious “sources of error”. However, Brown claims that it is natural for language learners to use whatever previous knowledge of grammar they already have when trying to understand the target language (ibid).

Brown (2007:102-103) brings up generalization and its counterpart overgeneralization. Generalization is, for example, when the student learns to use the -ed ending when talking in the past tense, and then applies it on other verbs correctly. Overgeneralization, on the other hand, occurs when this rule for regular verbs is used with irregular verbs also: goed. Brown states that a typical example of error that learners of English make is incorrect word order in indirect speech after wh-words; He told me where should I get off (inverted word order). (ibid:103). However, this could be an example of transfer as well since this is the natural word order in some languages.
3 Method and material
In the introduction of this essay one of the aims of the project is pointed out: to analyze the grammatical mistakes some Swedish learners of English make when speaking. In order to achieve this I wanted to listen to when students talk without especially thinking of how to say something. Furthermore, I wanted to compare the results with the perception of the students’ teachers as well as investigate how they teach grammar. To achieve this a qualitative method was chosen. The method chosen, both for the students and the teachers, was interviews. The reason for this choice in the first case was that interviews were found to be an excellent way of collecting data regarding spoken language. An alternative option to this method when interviewing students was not found. Still, an alternative method to interviews with students could have been to record their interactions with each other. The teachers’ perceptions could have been investigated using, for example, a questionnaire, but interviews were chosen in order to have the possibility of asking follow-up questions.

Throughout this essay the word mistake will be used, since it is difficult to judge whether a student actually has the competence for self-correction or not (see section 2.6.1).

3.1 The method
Interviews are the most efficient way of collecting data within the phenomenology tradition, since the interviewer has the opportunity to look into the interviewee’s mind and thoughts (Stensmo, 2002:121). When analyzing an interview it is of great importance to remember that the interviewee is giving a report of his or her experiences, and the answers can never be regarded as right or wrong (ibid).

In this study interviews were the only method used. However, the purpose of the interviews with students and teachers were different; to look at the language of the students was the purpose in the first case, whereas the content of what the teachers said was in focus in the latter.

The grammatical mistakes found are divided into verbs, pronouns, prepositions and other mistakes. They were divided like this because of the frequency of mistakes; verb mistakes were the most frequent ones, followed by preposition and pronoun mistakes.

3.2 The interviews and the interviewees
The school chosen as an object for my study was a junior high school in Sweden. The school has approximately five hundred students and has existed for thirty years. The reason for the choice of this school was that this was where I did my teaching practice period, which means
that I already knew the teachers interviewed as well as many of the students. I chose to
interview my tutor from my teacher training period and one other English teacher who works
in the same work-team. When choosing students I asked which students were willing to
participate, because voluntary participation is necessary in a study like this. It is difficult to
make someone talk, if he or she does not want to. Before interviewing the students of grade
seven their parents signed a paper giving permission for their children to take part in this
study. The students in grade nine were all over 15 years old and therefore no permission from
their parents was necessary. Some of the students knew me before doing the interviews,
which simplified the recruitment of students to interview. The aim of the interviews was to
get as much spoken data as possible to analyze from a linguistic point of view. All students
have Swedish as their mother tongue.

The interviews with the teachers were not recorded, because it was not found to be
necessary given that the content of what they said was the matter and not the language. The
interviews took place during lunch in the staffroom and at a restaurant. An interview guide
was used (see appendix), although it was not followed exactly. These two interviews were
performed in Swedish. Thus, when the teachers are quoted I have translated what they said.
However, classroom observations might have been a more efficient way of collecting data on
grammar teaching than interviews.

When interviewing the students a dictaphone was used, since the material was to be
analyzed linguistically. A total amount of approximately 40 minutes of spoken data was
collected. They were interviewed in pairs, on their own demand. Interviewing them in pairs
further made it possible to analyze how they interact with each other. When interviewing the
students an interview guide was used. However, these questions played the role of back-up
questions in case the conversation did not go very smoothly. In many cases the students were
asked follow-up questions to what they said in order to keep the conversation going. The
interviews with the students were carried out in English. The students did not know that their
language was to be analyzed; they knew that they participated in a study but they did not
know the aim of it. If they had known about the purpose of the interviews they might have
been more careful with their language, which would have affected the results. The strength of
recording interviews was that there was a possibility to go back and listen to them again, if
something was not clear the first time I listened to them.
3.3 The teachers and their students
The teachers have been given other names in order not to give away their identity. The names given reflect their sex and the grade they teach; Sara teaches grade seven and Nora teaches grade nine. The reason why grade seven and grade nine were chosen was to analyze if the students in grade seven made more and/or other mistakes than those in grade nine. The students interviewed are not named, since their results will be analyzed as a whole. Only two of the twelve students interviewed were girls, which might have affected the result given that boys in general are more communicative than girls and more willing to take risks when talking (Brown 2007: 136). Coates (2004:148), on the other hand, claims that girls are better language learners.

3.3.1 Sara and her students
Sara is a woman in her thirties who works 65% at the junior high school and the rest of the time is working on her PhD. She teaches one class in grade seven, and the Modern Language Pupils’ choice (MLP) in grades seven, eight and nine. MLP is the English offered to weaker students who need extra help to achieve a G. Before teaching at this junior high school she taught language proficiency at university.

Eight of Sara’s students in grade seven were interviewed: two girls and six boys. Many of the students who participated were students who had met me as a teacher trainee in their class before.

3.3.2 Nora and her students
Nora is also a woman in her early thirties. She teaches English, Spanish and Swedish. Her students in grade nine were asked if they wanted participate in this study, and those who volunteered were four boys.

3.4 Problems and limitations
The original plan for the study was to make it as a comparison between Sweden and South Africa, because I went there when starting to write this essay. However, due to some technical problems no interviews were recorded in South Africa, which meant that I had to change the aim of the study.

The first and maybe the biggest problem I came across was finding students in Sweden to interview. My first idea was to perform several short interviews, in order to interview as many as possible. However, considering the fact that I needed students who participated
voluntarily the number of students was not as large as I had hoped for. I therefore changed my original plan into making longer interviews with fewer students. When interviewing the students in grade seven I did not have access to a quiet room. Therefore, the interviews were carried out outside the classroom. Other students were working outside as well, which might have affected the students’ will to talk. Some students agreed to take part in the interview, not because they wanted to help but as an excuse to get out of class. This made them a little less communicative, and the outcome of their interviews was quite brief.

Moreover, the fact that they were interviewed in pairs may have affected their speech; they may have sometimes made the same mistake as their partner after hearing what grammatical form he or she used.

Considering the fact that only twelve students were interviewed it is impossible to generalize the results. The number of interviewed teachers is also small, which again makes the results impossible to generalize. The fact that both teachers are fairly young and have not worked many years might also have affected their answers to the given questions.

4 Results and discussion
When the outcome of the interviews is analyzed it is evident that the interviewed students tend to make similar mistakes, although with some variation within the group. As expected, the students in grade nine made other mistakes than those in the seventh grade, and they were also more willing to talk. When comparing the outcome with the perceptions of their teachers it can be concluded that the teachers know their students fairly well, although not everything agrees with what they have said. However, the differences found might originate in not all of the students in their classes having been interviewed: had all students participated the outcome might have looked differently.

The results are divided into two main sections: Sara’s student, her assumptions and ways of teaching grammar, and Nora’s students together with her assumptions and ways of teaching grammar.

The following table indicates how many mistakes of each kind were made during the interviews.
Table 1. Distribution of grammatical mistakes in different categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Prepositions</th>
<th>Other mistakes</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade seven</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade nine</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When looking at the table it is evident that verbs were the main issue both for the students in grade seven and the ones in grade nine. Furthermore, it seems that the students in grade nine made more mistakes concerning verbs than those in grade seven, but this could be explained by these students talking more. The students in grade seven were interviewed for 20 minutes, during which they said approximately 1000 words. The students in grade nine were interviewed for 20 minutes as well, during which they said approximately 1500 words.

4.1 Sara’s students

The students of grade seven had several problems when expressing themselves. The first and most striking one is the problem with forming complete sentences. In many cases the students answered the questions with only one word, and several times they answered: “I don’t know” even if the questions were fairly easy. This seemed to be a strategy used when they did not know how to answer in English. In a number of cases the students used code-switching (Brown, 2007:139); they said the words they did not know in Swedish. These strategies are negative ones, since code switching is not possible when talking to a native speaker, and giving up makes it impossible to convey your message. However, a more positive strategy used was asking each other for help, or asking the interviewer when not knowing the correct word.

4.1.1 Verbs

The main problem the students had was evidently verbs: concord mistakes or other verb mistakes. One girl was asked to re-tell the plot of a movie she had recently seen:

Interviewer: Could you tell me what that movie is about?

Student: A girl… And she die… And a boy move in… in her… a house […] but she dead.
This girl shows that she has difficulties when it comes to verb forms, when using third person; she also forgets to put in a verb where it is necessary. However, the same girl had no problems with the verb forms when speaking about herself:

**Student:** I play basket…  
**Interviewer:** Basketball?  
**Student:** Yes, basketball, and I play football.

Here we can see that the problem only occurs when the student is speaking about someone in the third person. The same mistake is found when another boy is asked to talk about one of his favourite movies; *Saw*:

**S:** It’s a… [kan jag ta det på svenska? Det är en psykopat]… psychopath…  
**I:** Does he kill people?  
**S:** No… *He make* them kill themselves.

Moreover, the progressive form was often found to be used inappropriately. One student was asked to talk about a movie called *Day of the dead*:

**I:** What do the people do? Do they try to hide?  
**S:** Shooting and hide.

Here the student uses two verbs in different forms. Why he chooses to use the simple present with the verb *hide* could be explained by the interviewer having used the simple present. However, when he chooses a word of his own the progressive form without the auxiliary verb *be* is being used. His friend is asked a similar question, about another movie, to which he answers:

“*Is two daddies… And they starting* a day-care”

Here we find a concord mistake as well as the wrong use of the progressive form. This student too leaves out the auxiliary verb, which indicates that he does not know how to use the progressive form correctly.

One of the other students is asked what kinds of computer games he likes, to which he answers: “Killing people”. The correct way to answer would have been “Games where you kill people”, or if the progressive form would still be used: “I like killing people”. To the question about what the same boy likes to do in his spare time he answers:

**I:** What do you like to do in your spare time?  
**S:** I like *football, ice-hockey* and be with my friends.

The question was what he likes to *do*, to which he does not answer. He says that he likes football and one can assume that he likes to *play* football, although the verb is missing. He
also uses the wrong form of be. After the verb like, either the progressive or a to infinitive is used: I like (...) and being/to be with my friends.

The contracted forms of subject and verb have a tendency of being overused; “I’m not online, I’m play computer games”. On the other hand, this can be interpreted as the students not knowing the function of the auxiliary verb be.

4.1.2 Pronouns
The students also showed that they had some problems regarding the use pronouns. Firstly, as in one of the previous examples, a boy is asked to talk about a movie: “he make them kill themself”. He uses a reflexive pronoun; but the wrong form is used. It is likely that the student does not know the pronouns very well, since what he uses is a form that does not exist. It should be “[...] kill themselves”.

Moreover, one girl shows that she has great problems with personal pronouns, i.e to distinguish between the subject and the object forms:

S: [...] he can see she but she dead [code switching: alltså hon ligger i koma] … And the… He’s the one that can see she.

Her interview partner shows that she has problems with pronouns as well, when wanting to explain an aspect of a movie: “It’s dance very much”. Here she uses the contracted form of it and is, where she probably wanted to use the personal pronoun they as in “they dance very much”.

Furthermore, one of the students shows problems with the preparatory subject there: “Is two daddies…”. Firstly, the verb form is wrong since the subject is plural, and secondly there is omitted: “There are two daddies”.

4.1.3 Prepositions
Several of the students had a tendency to make mistakes when using prepositions. Some of the mistakes made during the interviews look as follows:

I: For how long have you been doing that?
S: Amm… Three years with basket… And one and a half with football.

The preposition with sounds somewhat awkward in this sentence. Of would have been a more appropriate one. The same girl incorrectly uses the subordinator that instead of as when being asked if she watches a certain TV-show: “No, it’s the same time that Top Model”, instead of: “No, it’s on at the same time as Top Model”. 

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4.1.4 Other mistakes
Under this heading some of the problems that did not fit into the other categories are represented. Firstly, several students occasionally forgot the plural -s in nouns; “I like many movie”, “I like to look at videos […] skate video. And music video”. In the second example it is clear that the student knows that you are supposed to put an -s at the end of a plural word, but he seems to forget it later on. Yet, it can be assumed that he makes a guess when to use the plural -s, given that he only uses it correctly two out of three times.

Many of the answers were given as incomplete sentences. One student is talking about his favourite computer game and describes it as follows;

S: It’s the world biggest online game… Nine million… eh…
I: It has nine million players?
S: Yes… nine million players…

Furthermore, one of the boys is describing his favourite computer game, and gets a follow-up question:

I: Is that what you do in your spare time? Play computer games?
S1: Yes, I like that
S2: Good way to train English

Here too we find that the student does not use a subject and a finite verb when wanting to say that computer games are a good way to train your English. Yet, ellipses are common in spoken English; some words are left out when talking. These structures would probably be seen as “wrong”, or as incomplete sentences, but structures of this kind are likely to be heard in the spoken language.

4.2 Interview with Sara
Sara says that she finds verbs to be the area where her students make most mistakes. They make mistakes both with concord and with tense use. The main verbal problem they have, according to Sara, is the distinction between is/are. The mistakes are often made when speaking but not so often when writing. Furthermore, she says that her students usually are able to express themselves orally. Many times it is not correctly done, but one can understand the message the students want to convey. Their grammatical problems do not stop them from speaking. Their biggest problem is the vocabulary.

Spoken language is in focus in Sara’s classroom. When she went to school the written language was in focus, and she did not like that. She advocates that it is better to start with spoken language and then move on to the written one. The students should learn how to use
paraphrasing, if they do not know how to express what they want to say exactly. If they are
going to write about something, they first talk about it, not vice versa.

Sara tries to use as much English as possible in the classroom. The students tend to
listen more when she speaks in the target language. However, when teaching grammar she
often compares English grammar to Swedish and sometimes it is necessary that she speaks
Swedish. Sara also tries to work together with the subject of Swedish when it comes to
grammar in order not to confuse her students too much. For example, if they are working with
nouns in the Swedish classes Sara will try to do the same thing in the English classes.

The students in the MLP she teaches have a negative attitude towards grammar; they do
not like to study it at all. The seventh graders, however, have a much more positive view on it.
She thinks this is because the word grammar is negatively loaded, and grammar is “supposed
to be boring”. The students in grade nine “know this”, but not the students in grade seven.

Moreover, she says that her students benefit from structured teaching:

When explaining grammar I often compare it to maths, because when it
comes to maths they already know that there are certain rules that decide
how things should be done.

Sara advocates that it is the teacher’s responsibility to make grammar more fun, and easier to
understand:

We often try to play with grammar, and when I see that they have got the
grasp of it we move over to the material, either a pamphlet or the work-
book.

The functioning of the group is an important factor when it comes to making the students
talk. The teacher has a responsibility to try and create a positive atmosphere in the classroom.
The students need to feel that they are allowed to make mistakes. The seventh graders she
teaches (those interviewed for this study) talk, but she has to “force” them into talking
English. The MLP-students are nearly impossible to get to talk.

4.3 Discussion
This part will be divided into two sections: a discussion about the students’ performances in
comparison to what their teacher has said, and a discussion about why the mistakes were
made.
4.3.1 Sara’s perception
Clearly, Sara has a very good grasp of what is the most problematic part of English grammar for her students. She said that verbs are the main issue, and that was what was found when the interviews were analyzed. The main verbal problem according to Sara is *is/are*. However, this was not found in many cases in these interviews. Of course, this could be because the students did not talk about things where these two forms are much used. Sara also said that her students tried to talk and that their vocabulary was what stopped them. This agreed well with the findings of this study. However, some mistakes not mentioned by Sara were found (see sections 4.1.2, 4.1.3 and 4.1.4). But, this ought to be explained by Sara answering the question about what her students’ *main problem* is, to which she answered *verbs*.

4.3.2 The mistakes
The interviews showed that the biggest problem for the students was the use of verbs, and especially inflections. The reason for their problems could be that the students used their previous grammar knowledge, of Swedish, where the verbs are not inflected according to person. In Swedish the verbs look the same in both the singular and the plural, as well as in the first, second and third person. Furthermore, the third person *-s* might be excluded because of the fact that the learner needs to make an effort when putting in the *-s*, and might therefore forget it. This mistake ought to be explained by what Brown (2007:102) refers to as *interference*. The students have applied the grammatical forms of their mother tongue on the target language, leading to the loss of an important component of the English grammar. Only one example was found where the students put in an *-s* where it should not be, and a few cases were found where *is* was used instead of *are*. This could be explained by the students not having learnt to use the *-s* ending, which would rather make them forget it than use it too much.

*Overgeneralization* (Brown, 2007:103) could be the explanation of the over-use of the progressive form; in Swedish the progressive form is not much used and therefore the students do not have anything to compare it with. The learners are aware of the fact that there is a form which they do not use in their mother tongue. However, there is a will to speak correctly and use this particular form. Yet, the knowledge of when it is appropriate to use and when it is not is absent.

In the case of “he can see *she*” one can assume that this is due to *transfer*, or *interference* (ibid:103). In Swedish, the use of the subject form of third person singular personal pronouns where the object form is required is fairly common, in colloquial language.
Thus, when speaking English the student uses the same way of speaking Swedish. Still, this is not how everybody talks, but one may hear Swedish speakers use this form and it might be the explanation of the student’s choice of pronoun. Nevertheless, this error could depend on other factors such as the student being nervous or simply not knowing the object form, thus overgeneralizing the subject form.

“He make them kill themself” might be explained as overgeneralization, where the student has understood that a self-ending is required but has not understood the difference between the singular and the plural. Hence, the ending –self even though the subject is plural.

Before analyzing the preposition mistakes it is important to say that prepositions are difficult to learn for all language learners, in all languages. There is often no correspondence between prepositions in different languages; where Swedish uses on, English might use with, and Spanish might use to. Accordingly, most expressions including prepositions have to be learnt by heart since they are not “logical”. Given this, one can assume that these students have not yet studied enough English to have learnt when to use one preposition and when to use another. However, some explanations of the mistakes can be found:

The first case of a preposition mistake presented was “Three years with football and one and a half with basket”. The most likely reason of this mistake ought to be transfer, since this use of preposition can be found Swedish. In Swedish informal speech the expression “hålla på med” (do with, my translation) is very common, and it is to be assumed that the student has translated the Swedish expression word by word, which has resulted in the use of the wrong preposition.

4.4 Nora’s students

Doubtless, there is a great difference between the students in grade seven and those in grade nine. The ninth graders were much more communicative and did not avoid questions to the same extent as the seventh graders did. The answers given by the students were more elaborate. Still, the students had problems with a number of grammatical rules, presented below.

4.4.1 Verbs

Similar to the students in grade seven the students in grade nine showed that they had some difficulties regarding verbs and their many forms. The first and most striking difficulty they showed was with -s when talking about someone in the third person:
S1: [...] and Scofield get into the prison because he is smart and intelligent and he help eight people [...] 
S2: There’s a boxer who… kick Kung-Fu or… yeah a boxer… 
S3: [...] it’s a bit funny… It show how we are 

S1 only shows problems with the -s added to lexical verbs (help, kick), but no problems with the distinction between is/are. Nor does he have problems with the contracted form of there and is. S3 shows the same difficulties with the s-ending, (it show), but no problem with the contracted form. However, when presenting himself he says: “My name is … and I is 15 years old”. Here the conclusion that he does not fully master the use of is/are can be drawn. 

Furthermore, the contracted form of the verb be is found to be used incorrectly, resulting in the double use of the verb, as in the following example: 

S1: My name is… And I’m 15 years old 
S2: My name is … and I’m is 15 years old. 

The reason why this contraction is used incorrectly ought to be that the student does not know what I’m really means. He uses it because his friend has used it before him. The student does not seem to know that ‘m in this case means be, hence his use of ’m together with is. 

As the seventh graders these students tend to overuse the progressive form and not use complete verb-phrases, where they leave out the auxiliary be: 

S: […] and the police hunting them... 

I: What do you do in your spare time? 
S1: Sleeping. 
S2: Playing computers. 
S3: Chatting 

All of these answers are missing a subject, and the progressive form should not be used. Both of the students should have inserted an “I like”, or simply have said “I” and then added the simple present tense verb. However, subject omission is a very common feature of spoken language, and this way of speaking should perhaps not be regarded as a grammatical mistake. In the last example the –ing form could also be regarded as a nominalized form, where chatting is more of a phenomenon rather than a verb. 

As previously mentioned the students occasionally forget the auxiliary verb when using the progressive form. Moreover, they also forget the auxiliary verb when talking in the past tense and the future tense:
S1: [...] and they met some other people who already been to the island

S2: I gonna see the new movie now.

Both utterances are comprehensible and the students manage to convey their messages. Still, S1 has forgotten the auxiliary verb have in have been, and S2 has forgotten be. S2’s utterance is rather informal and here the contracted form I’m would have been appropriate.

4.4.2 Prepositions

The grade nine students also made quite a few mistakes when it came to prepositions:

S1: They escape the prison [...] Lincoln’s brother was accused to kill the president’s brother.

Firstly, in the first statement, the necessary preposition from has been left out. Secondly, accused should be followed by the preposition of and the progressive form: accused of killing.

In this case, to may have been used as an infinitive marker rather than as a preposition.

Furthermore, S2 shows that he has some problems as well when saying:

S2: I’ve been the best on a competition.

The student uses on in stead of in.

S1 in the following example shows some problems:

I: Oh, so you make your own music?
S1: Yes… Haha… I’m not so good. But I least try.

Here the student has forgotten to put in a preposition, suggesting that he might not know the correct structure: but I at least try.

4.3.3 Other mistakes

In this section some of the problems that do not fit into the previous categories are covered. Problems with adverbs were found in a few cases, as in the example below:

S3: My English comes most from movies and programs.

Here the student has forgotten the -ly at the end of most, which indicates that he does not know that it is an adverb; My English comes mostly from movies and programs.

As mentioned previously the students showed difficulties with the contracted subject and verb, as in this case: “I like techno when it’s singing”. Though this sentence is grammatically correct there is one problem; the student is talking about techno which is a music genre and techno is performed by people. There is a need to specify this, in view of the fact that a person or people are singing: I like techno when they are singing.
4.5 Interview with Nora

Nora says that all of her students are good at expressing themselves orally. Everyone in her grade nine will achieve a G (pass the course) at the end of year nine. Still, there is one thing that they find especially problematic: verbs. The different tenses are the problematic part of English grammar for the students. She says that the students also occasionally make mistakes when it comes to is/are.

Just like Sara, Nora finds that spoken language is the most important to focus on. The written language is not all that important. She says that written language will come when the students are able to speak:

When my grade nine started taking English with me in the seventh grade we made a contract. The contract was that at the end of the fall semester in grade eight everyone has to speak English inside the classroom. They could choose when they wanted to start; some students chose to start the second semester of grade seven, but no later than by Christmas in grade eight did they have to start talking English.

This contract is something that has worked better than expected; the students always talk English among themselves even when they do not know that Nora is not listening to them:

Sometimes when I walk around in the classroom I overhear the students talking about what they are going to do during the weekend.

She says that the students’ attitude towards grammar is that “grammar is boring”. However, this is something she thinks is because of the word grammar. When they have grammar classes the students are interested and they participate well in the classes, and their attitude originates in the value of the word grammar. She says that many students sigh when they hear that they are going to study grammar. Something, which she can not really explain, makes grammar a negatively loaded word.

When teaching grammar Nora has chosen to use the workbook, which is the teaching aid the school provides, together with the textbook. This is because the workbook is a good guideline to what the students should know. In a typical grammar class they will go through the area of grammar they are going to work with on the whiteboard together. The students participate a lot. They ask Nora questions and she asks them. It is important that nobody feels
left out. When this is done they will move on to the workbook, or sometimes some alternative material.

4.6 Discussion
This part will be divided in the same way as 4.3.

4.6.1 Nora’s perception
Nora said that her students were communicative and that all of them were able to convey a message. This was found to correspond well with the students’ performances. Verbs were said to be the main issue, which also agreed well with the findings of this study. However, Nora said that the students had some minor problems with *is/are* and similar grammatical issues. In several cases these mistakes were made, especially when using the contracted verb forms. There were also some concord mistakes involving lexical verbs. Furthermore, mistakes were found that Nora did not bring up. But, this should have the same explanation as in the case of Sara; she answered the question about her students’ main problem, to which she answered verbs.

4.6.2 The mistakes
Several of the problems found when analyzing the mistakes of grade seven were found in grade nine as well. Transfer and overgeneralization ought to be the most probable explanations here as well. However, some differences were found between grade seven and nine.

The grade nine students tended to use contracted subject and verb where it was not needed, as in the case of “I’m is 15 years old. The students seem not to have understood what these forms stand for; they use I’m as if it were one word. This appears to be a clear case of overgeneralization; the learners have learnt one form of the target language which does not exist in their mother tongue, and they use it even when it is not appropriate (Brown, 2007:103).

The mistakes involving prepositions should be explained by the student not having enough knowledge of the expressions involving prepositions. In the case of: *I’ve been the best on a competition* it can be assumed that the student made a random guess and simply chose the first preposition that came to mind. On the other hand, it can also be seen as
overgeneralization (Brown, 2007:103), where the student has too little knowledge of the language and therefore overuses the ones they already know.

5. Conclusions
As stated in the introduction, the aim of this essay was to look into what kinds of mistakes Swedish learners of English make, and find some answers to what could be the cause of these problems. Furthermore, I wanted to investigate how well the teachers know their students, to see if the mistakes corresponded to what the teachers thought. I also wanted to see what grammar teaching in Sweden can look like, and where the main focus may lie. A qualitative method was used: interviews. Both teachers and students were interviewed, but the purposes of the interviews were different. The students’ language was to be analyzed, whereas the content was the main issue in the teacher interviews. Twelve students were interviewed, and two teachers. The students were recorded, whereas the teachers were not. In the case of the students, interviews also made it possible to maintain a conversation since I could ask follow-up questions, which would not have been possible if they had just been given a topic to talk about among themselves. However, the students’ awareness of them being recorded might have stopped them from talking as much as they would have without a recorder; their language might have looked completely different if it would have been an authentic situation. The strength of using interviews with the teachers was that there was also a possibility to ask follow-up questions, and to ask again for clarification in the same cases. Nevertheless, one weakness is that since I did not have any experience in doing interviews some questions might have been overlooked. A more experienced interviewer might also have interpreted the answers differently. Moreover, classroom observations might have been a more reliable method for investigating the way the teaching of grammar was carried out.

Hopefully, English teachers and English teachers-to-be may take part of this study to compare it to their own ideas, and perhaps get some new ones. If one is interested in spoken language more than in the written one, this study could be of interest.

The aim of this study was reached, and some answers were found. In the introduction I stated that my hypothesis was that the teachers’ main focus lies on the written language. However, this turned out to be wrong. Still, the size of this study is too small which makes it impossible to draw any major conclusions from it. The study provides a very brief look into what problems students may have and how teachers may go about helping them improve their language.
The results showed that verbs were the area where the students in both grade seven and nine made most mistakes. Prepositions and pronouns were other problematic areas for the students. Both teachers find spoken language important, and they start with spoken language and not written. One teacher uses the work book the school provides, and the other compares English grammar to, for example, math.

Spoken language has not been as much in focus as the written one, in terms of research made. In relation to this study, one could continue researching the mistakes made in spoken language. Furthermore, the study of the correspondence between the students’ production in comparison to their teachers’ assumptions is a field which could be investigated further. It would also be interesting to look more into the teaching of grammar, for instance by doing classroom observations.

The original plan for this study was to compare grammatical mistakes made by learners of English in Sweden with those made by South African learners of English. Furthermore, I wanted to compare how grammar teaching is carried out in the two countries. This is another interesting area to look into in future research.
References:
Appendix

Interview guide (students)

- Tell me about yourself. Name, age, where you go to school etc.
- What do you like to do in your spare time?
- What was the latest movie you saw? What was it about?
- Who is your favourite actor? Why?
- Do you like sports? Do you do any yourself?
- Do you watch TV? What do you watch?
- Do you like computer games? What kinds? Tell me about them.
- Have you ever been really afraid? What happened?
- Which was the happiest day of your life?
- What is your favourite holiday?
- Do you have an idol? Who is that?
- Do you use the Internet? What do you do when you are online? What are your favourite homepages?
- Are you interested in fashion? What celebrity do you think is the best dressed? Do you have a model that you look up to?

Interview guide (Teachers)

- What would you say a typical grammar class looks like?
- What is the students’ attitude towards grammar?
- What do you feel you focus on the most in the classroom: written or spoken English?
- What kinds of mistakes do the students make? Concord, articles, etc..?
- Do you feel that your students can express themselves orally in English?
• What would you say is the students’ biggest problem when talking English?
• Do you plan your classes yourself or together with your co-workers?
• Do you come up with assignments yourself, or together with co-workers?
• How much do you use the textbook? How do you use it?
• Do you always speak English when teaching? Why/Why not?