Assessing the Learning Process or Grading the Learning Product?

Formative and Summative Assessment of English in a Swedish upper secondary school

Charlotte Janerdahl
ABSTRACT
This paper presents an investigation of the use of assessment and grading practice in an upper secondary school in the south of Sweden. The reason for this investigation is that the author, who is in the teacher training programme, seeks to learn more about these important and controversial issues. The aim is to investigate how the teachers work with formative and summative assessment and how this affects the students’ learning processes and learning outcomes. The research questions focus on how the teachers work with and follow up feedback to the students, how students assess themselves, and how formative assessment affects summative assessment. The primary material and method of this case study consist of interviews with six teachers of English. The results reveal that formative assessment is implemented to a certain extent; the teachers’ feedback to the students is implemented more successfully than students’ self-assessment. Assessment is time-consuming and this is the reason why it has not yet been fully implemented by the teachers. Grading is considered to be less time-consuming and an easy task due to the formative assessment that the teachers do throughout the course of the subject English. The results further reveal that the teachers work differently with assessment and less than expected with formative assessment; despite these facts it is interesting that the students do improve their learning and their grades. The conclusion of this study is that there is a need for more team-work and discussions between teacher colleagues, as well as further education in assessment practice in order to work successfully with formative assessment in particular. The results and the conclusions of this study may be of significance and interest for other teachers and education researchers.

KEYWORDS: formative assessment, grading, knowledge requirements, students’ self-assessment, summative assessment, syllabus for English 5, teachers’ feedback.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION................................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Aim, research questions and scope................................................................................... 2  
2 MATERIAL AND METHOD ................................................................................................ 2   
   2.2 Method.............................................................................................................................. 3   
   2.3 Problems, limitations and structure of paper............................................................... 4  
3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND........................................................................................ 5   
   3.1 Formative assessment....................................................................................................... 6       
      3.1.1 Teachers’ feedback to students .................................................................................. 7       
      3.1.2 Students’ self-assessment........................................................................................... 7       
   3.2 Summative assessment ..................................................................................................... 8       
      3.2.1 The syllabus for English 5 ......................................................................................... 9       
      3.2.2 The knowledge requirements for English 5 ............................................................. 10  
4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS ............................................................................................... 11   
   4.1 Informing the students of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements......................... 11       
   4.2 Formative assessment and feedback on students’ performance ..................................... 14       
   4.3 Students’ self-assessment and follow-up on assessment ................................................ 17       
   4.4 The grading process; summative assessment ................................................................. 19       
   4.5 Formative and summative assessment in symbiosis?...................................................... 21  
5 CONCLUSION..................................................................................................................... 21  
REFERENCES  
APPENDIX 1
1 INTRODUCTION
Grading is a much debated and controversial issue which has perhaps received too much attention. Large international investigations measure students’ results and compare students’ grades; the material is used in politics to evaluate the educational system and determine, among other things, whether or not the educational system needs more financial funding (B. Lundahl 2009:387f). Yet, it is the learning product that is in focus; the assessment process is overshadowed by the grading issue and therefore needs to be brought back to focus. What is more, assessment and grading are perhaps two of the most important tools for teachers to have knowledge of and since these are not studied in depth in the teacher training programme the author seeks to investigate and gain more knowledge within these areas.

The Swedish school system is constantly undergoing changes and reforms. In July 2011 the Swedish Government introduced a new curriculum which meant new syllabi for all the subjects and a new grading system. Having realised that the old grading system ranging from G-MVG (and U for fail) was not explicit enough and too open to interpretation, the new system E-A (and F for fail) is supposedly more explicit and easier to interpret and it also has more steps. Another change in the syllabus is that the grading criteria are now replaced with knowledge requirements. The knowledge requirements E-A respectively state the quality of the students’ knowledge which is what the grades should be based on at the end of a course. The new syllabus and its knowledge requirements are meant to provide increased equality in teaching and grading in that the guidelines are more specific than previously (Skolverket 2011a [www]).

Summative assessment was in focus for a long time in the Swedish school system. Grades had a main role and function, and the learning product was considered more important than the learning process, which is perhaps still the case (Petterson et al. 2007). The current grading system focuses more on the learning process and formative assessment than previously, but since formative assessment is a relatively new assessment practice it is uncertain whether its features have been fully implemented in teaching or not. Consequently, this study investigates how formative and summative assessment is used in practice by six teachers of English in a Swedish upper secondary school and how this affects the students’ learning outcome. It also investigates how teachers use assessment when grading students. Assessment in this study refers to the continuous documentation and follow-up of the students’ learning progression that the teachers do throughout a semester or course of the

1 G-MVG: G for pass, VG for good pass and MVG for pass with special distinction.
subject English. *Grading* is the process in which the students’ final grades on the course are determined, based on the assessment and in relation to the knowledge requirements. Formative assessment, or assessment *for* learning, is the ongoing assessment process while summative assessment, or assessment *of* learning, is equalised with grading (B. Lundahl 2009:389f).

1.1 Aim, research questions and scope
The aim of this study is to investigate the use of formative and summative assessment of English in a Swedish upper secondary school, that is, how to best apply assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning for the students’ ultimate learning outcome. The following research questions are addressed:

1. How do the teachers inform the students of the knowledge requirements of the syllabus and how to fulfil them?
2. What sort of feedback do the teachers give the students?
3. How do the students assess their own performance, and if so, how is self-assessment carried out?
4. How is assessment followed up throughout the course and can any improvements be seen due to the teachers’ and students’ efforts?
5. How does formative assessment affect summative assessment and to what extent?

This study does not seek to evaluate or criticise how the teachers work with assessment and grading, but focuses on its practical functions, i.e. how the theoretical guidelines of assessment and grading are practically applied. However, a general evaluation of how formative and summative assessment practice is implemented in teaching to this point is inevitable considering the research questions addressed. Answers to the questions posed are based on practical evidence from interviews with six upper secondary teachers of English.

2 MATERIAL AND METHOD

2.1 Material
The primary data for this study consist of interviews with six teachers of English in upper secondary school in the south of Sweden. The six interviewees are presented in Table 1. Note that all names are pseudonyms and not the interviewees’ real names for the sake of their anonymity.
Table 1. *Description of the interviewees.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Teaching since</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Level of teaching</th>
<th>Other subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Margareta</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Teacher training programme</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>History, Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Teacher training programme</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Teacher training programme</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Teacher training programme</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helene</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Teacher training programme</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bertil</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Teacher training programme</td>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview questions concern formative and summative assessment and how the teachers interpret and use the syllabus and knowledge requirements for English; all of the issues addressed in the research questions are specified in the interview questions (see Appendix 1). The primary data for this study also include the syllabus for English in upper secondary school, English 5, developed and published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (henceforth Skolverket) in cooperation with the Swedish Government and Parliament. The syllabus also includes the knowledge requirements which are needed to fully appreciate and analyse the complexity of assessment and grading. The new knowledge requirements were introduced in June 2011, and were put in effective use in August the same year.

2.2 Method

Firstly, the collected material about formative and summative assessment and grading was studied. The syllabus for English in upper secondary school (Skolverket 2011e [www]) which also contains the knowledge requirements, was also studied in detail; the commentary material gave a further understanding of the new syllabus. Secondly, the studied material was considered when a number of interview questions were formulated to represent the research questions. The interviews ultimately enabled a comparison between research literature and the practical use of formative and summative assessment. The interviewees were selected based on the author’s connections to that school. When the teachers were asked if they would like to participate in an interview they were guaranteed the following: their identities will not be disclosed, the material will not be used for any other purpose than this study and the interviews are not an individual analysis or evaluation of their professional roles as teachers.
Furthermore, the specific topic of formative and summative assessment was not revealed prior to the interviews; the teachers were informed that the interviews would concern assessment and grading in general. This precaution was taken for the sake of authentic and honest answers; the teachers were therefore not able to prepare ‘the right answers’ and the observer’s paradox (Labov 1972:209) was avoided.

The interviews were conducted with one teacher at a time (except for one interview where two interviewees participated) and lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Swedish (the mother tongue of all the interviewees) to avoid any potential discomfort of speaking English, and audio recorded using a recording device on a laptop; the interviewees gave their consent to the audio recording. In addition to the audio recordings, the interviewer also took supportive notes. The recorded interviews were partially transcribed and translated to English for the convenience of using quotations in the results in Section 4. The interview questions were not asked in a set order but were used as a frame for a discussion. A discussion around the questions was expected to lead to a deeper understanding of the viewpoints that the interviewees expressed on the issue of assessment and grading. The locations for the interviews were two different coffee rooms at the school in question and the environment was therefore comfortable and well-known to the interviewees.

2.3 Problems, limitations and structure of paper
The material and method used are suitable for this type of small-scale study. However, a possible weakness of the material, i.e. the interviewed teachers, is that one of the teachers, Bertil, did not thoroughly answer the questions that were asked but he rather discussed the issues in very general terms. Furthermore, Bertil initially said that he was teaching English, which is why he was asked to participate. However, during the interview he said that he was not currently teaching English but Spanish. The interviewer asked if he would consider the interview questions from an English teaching point of view, which he said he would, but the answers are still not completely thorough. The reliable answers that he did give have been used in this study, while some have been left out due to their irrelevance. Another possible weakness is that during the interview that was conducted with two teachers, Sara and Helene, Sara had to leave halfway through. However, since the questions were not asked in a specific order, most of the questions had already been dealt with.

On a few occasions, the interviews were interrupted by other people passing through the coffee room. However, this did not disturb the interviews in a negative way; the interviewees rather seemed to relax more. Furthermore, the mentioned interruptions during the interviews
caused some unwanted noise on the audio recordings, but since the interviewer took notes, the quality of the interviews was not affected. The recorded interviews were not fully transcribed; partly because of the interruptions and partly because the general discussions around the questions at times led to discussions of topics that were not relevant for this study.

During the interviews the author experienced that the teachers answered some of the questions as if they were very secure of what they believed were the right answers. This could indicate that they knew in theory how to apply formative assessment, but it is uncertain whether their answers revealed how they actually applied them in practice. An example of this is that all the six interviewed teachers expressed that formative assessment facilitates summative assessment. However, since they did not fully apply the features of formative assessment (feedback and students’ self-assessment) it is uncertain if they could actually evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of formative assessment in relation to summative assessment.

This is a case study; the six interviewees represent one upper secondary school in the south of Sweden and the use of formative and summative assessment in that particular school and by the six particular teachers, therefore the results cannot be generalised. The results can, however, provide an indication of what the situation is like in Sweden in terms of the use of formative and summative assessment, and inspire to further investigation of these issues.

This paper has the following structure: Section 3 presents a theoretical background concerning formative and summative assessment and their features. The results of the study are presented in Section 4; the research questions are answered based on the teachers’ answers to the interview questions and the results are also connected to the theoretical background. The results are discussed and analysed in depth in relation to the research questions in Section 4; hence, there is no separate discussion section in this paper. Finally, the conclusions that have been drawn from the results are presented in Section 5, along with suggestions for further studies within the field of assessment practice.

3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Assessment and grading are the tools which teachers and schools use to evaluate students’ acquisition of knowledge. Grading is also believed to be used, to some extent, as a pedagogical tool to discipline and sort students. However, grading should not be used for the purpose of disciplining students, since it is neither stated in the curricula nor in the syllabi. The sorting function of students is still inevitable in that grades, to a great extent, decide who gets accepted to higher education; equality in teaching and grading is therefore crucial for
students to have equal opportunities to apply for higher education. Skolverket designs the National Tests\(^2\) which are thought to enable equal measuring of students’ knowledge, as well as result in equal grading (Skolverket 2011d [www]). Yet, the learning product, i.e. the grade, should not be in greater focus than the learning process. What is more, justified grading would be impossible without formative assessment of the learning process since that is what the grades should be based on.

Everything that the students do in the classroom should be assessed by the teacher. This includes speaking, writing, listening and reading activities; either individually or in groups and in full class. Tests, in any shape, are also assessed and often graded, but are not to be the sole base on which the final grade is given. The formative assessment made throughout the course is what the summative assessment, i.e., the final grade is based on. The formative assessment is hence a measurement of the students’ learning process while the summative assessment is a measurement of what quality and level of knowledge the students have acquired (C. Lundahl, 2011:129; Skolverket 2011b [www]).

### 3.1 Formative assessment

Formative assessment, also called assessment for learning, had its breakthrough in 1998 when Black and Wiliam published an article on the subject; their overall results indicated a need for emphasised focus on interaction in the classroom to increase the students’ involvement in their learning process and, ultimately, their learning outcome (C. Lundahl 2011:52f). The main idea of formative assessment is that students are informed of what they have to learn and how to do so; it is the teachers’ responsibility to inform the students of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements, but it is the students’ responsibility to pursue the syllabus and the knowledge requirements in order to fulfil them. The students also have a responsibility to inform their teachers of their potential difficulties within certain areas so that the teacher can adjust the teaching to the students’ needs; when difficulties are visualised teachers and students can work together to increase the students’ learning (ibid. 2011:12). According to Hattie (2009:25) it is crucial that teaching and learning are visible:

> The teacher must know when learning is correct or incorrect; [...] learn to monitor, seek and give feedback; and know to try alternative learning strategies when others do not work. What is most important is that teaching is visible to the student, and that the learning is visible to the teacher.

The tasks that are assessed signal to the students what qualities the teacher considers to be important; in language teaching and learning the communicative competence should be in

\(^2\) The Swedish National Tests can be compared to the British National Tests.
focus (Skolverket 2011e [www]) and therefore such abilities should be assessed more so than grammar and vocabulary (Pettersson et al 2011:32f). Another important aspect of formative assessment is the process in which the students reach an answer, a result or a conclusion; the ‘right answer’ is not of as great interest as the process which leads to it (Korp 2003:80f). Formative assessment should always focus on the learning process and not on the learning product.

### 3.1.1 Teachers’ feedback to students

Feedback is one of the two most important features of formative assessment. Regular oral and written feedback is to be given to the students and the performance of the task should be in focus rather than the student’s motivation and attitude towards it. In formative assessment it is also important that the teacher and the student follow up and together discuss the results so that the student understands what skills s/he needs to improve; this can be done in class or during the teacher-student-parent conferences. The feedback hence works as a contribution to the learning process and the teacher can re-evaluate his/her teaching method and approach in accordance with the feedback from and to the students. This supposedly improves both the teacher’s teaching method and the student’s learning process. When giving feedback it is also important that the positive achievements are emphasised rather than the negative ones so that the feedback has a motivating and forward thinking effect (C. Lundahl 2011:54ff). The key to successful formative assessment, according to studies by, among others, Butler (1988:6), seems to be extensive comments on a task or test performed rather than a grade (E-A). The study shows that students who are only given a grade on a task tend not to improve their performance markedly, while those who are given extensive comments do improve in the next task or test. Those who were given both a grade and an extensive comment however improved the least; these students focused on the grade instead of the comments and therefore the comments were of no use and did not serve the intended purpose. Butler’s results show that formative assessment and feedback improve the learning process which ultimately can lead to a higher learning quality. Furthermore, extensive written comments as feedback should be explicit and focus on the students’ strengths and weaknesses so that the students can use these as guidelines in their learning process (Black & Wiliam 1998:10).

### 3.1.2 Students’ self-assessment

The second important feature of formative assessment is students’ self-assessment which builds on qualitative feedback. Black & Wiliam (1998:8) make a strong statement about the relation between formative assessment and students’ self-assessment:
if formative assessment is to be productive, pupils should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve.

Furthermore, self-assessment requires that students understand the syllabus and the knowledge requirements since it is in relation to these that the students should assess themselves. The students also need to reflect upon the feedback from their teachers and, based on the feedback, invent appropriate learning strategies to continue their learning process (B. Lundahl 2009:400). The syllabus and the knowledge requirements for English 5 (see further 3.2.1 and 3.2.2) state that students should be able to process and improve their own oral and written productions; this is a sort of self-assessment which makes students take responsibility for their learning process (Skolverket 2011e [www]).

The implementation of the students’ self-assessment, however, demands a great deal of effort from teachers in terms of designing successful methods and tools for the students to assess themselves. Self-assessment is also a feature which needs to be implemented at an early stage and gradually since the contents of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements need to be put in relation to the teaching for the students to understand how to assess themselves in relation to the criteria (B. Lundahl 2009:400; Lindberg et al 2011:242ff). Students’ self-assessment does not seem to be implemented to any great extent in Swedish schools; this is partly due to little research on the issue and partly due to its novelty in assessment practice (Lindberg et al 2011:242).

3.2 Summative assessment

Summative assessment or assessment of learning, which is the summary of the knowledge acquisition the student has developed in the learning process, is what the grade should be based on. Summative assessment and grading can hence be considered as equivalents. Grades should reflect the quality of the knowledge the student has acquired at the end of a course and all types of tasks that the student has performed should be taken in account. Summative assessment or grading should only be applied at the end of a course when it can be established whether a student has fulfilled the knowledge requirements for a grade or not. If tests and assignments are graded during the course of English this is also considered as summative assessment; anything that is assessed in relation to the syllabus and the knowledge requirements is summative rather than formative (B. Lundahl 2009:390; C. Lundahl 2011:32ff). The qualities for the grades E-A are stated in the knowledge requirements of the syllabus (Skolverket 2011e [www]) and should be in focus when designing and planning teaching.
3.2.1 The syllabus for English 5

The syllabus for English 5 in upper secondary school contains five points which explain what abilities students should have the opportunity to learn at school and then develop further (Skolverket 2011e [www]):

1. Understanding of spoken and written English as well as ability to interpret the contents.
2. Ability to formulate and communicate in spoken and written English.
3. Ability to use language strategies in different contexts.
4. Ability to adjust the language for different purposes, receivers and situations.
5. Ability to discuss and reflect upon living conditions, social issues and cultural phenomena in different contexts and different parts of the world where English is used.

These are the overall aims of the syllabus. Furthermore, the Central Contents section is divided into three sections; Communication, Reception and Production and Interaction. In each of these sections, the five points stated above are explained and specified in further detail. The Communication, Reception, Production and Interaction sections take on the four language skills writing, reading, listening and speaking. These are to be developed and practiced throughout the course and result in English language proficiency (Skolverket 2011e [www]).

Within the Communication area students are supposed to:
• deal with areas connected to their education, society- and working life; current events, thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences, emotions, relationships, and ethical questions.
• know the contents and form of different kinds of fiction.
• develop further knowledge of living conditions, attitudes, values and traditions, and issues of social, political and cultural nature in different contexts and from different parts of the world where English is used.
• know about the spread and status of the English language around the world.

Within the Reception area students are supposed to:
• understand spoken and written language from different social contexts and dialects.
• read texts that are instructive, narrative, summarizing, explanatory, discursive, reporting and argumentative, also via movies and other media.
• be able to understand spoken language and dialogues of different kinds, e.g. interviews.
• study literature and fiction.
• read texts of different kinds and for different purposes, e.g. manuals, texts and reports from popular science.
• use strategies to listen and read in different ways and for different purposes.
• use different ways to search for, choose and critically examine texts and spoken language.
• know how words and phrases in oral and written presentations create structure and context by clarifying an introduction, causality, time aspect and conclusion.

Within the Production and Interaction area students should:
• practice oral and written production and interaction of different kinds, also in more formal contexts, where students practice giving instructions, valuating, arguing, motivating and summarizing their points of view.
• develop strategies to actively participate in discussions related to social and working life.
• be able to adapt their own and their peers’ oral and written productions to vary, clarify, and create structure and adapt to the aim and situation, and to be able to use words and phrases to clarify aspects of reasons and time (Skolverket 2011e [www]. My translation.).

The contents of the syllabus that is to be taught is rather explicit, but at the same time open to interpretation. This enables the teaching to be designed differently on the local level, within the municipality, the teacher team or by the individual teacher as long as it is in accordance with the syllabus and can be considered equal on a national level (Skolverket 2011c [www]). However, equality in teaching and grading is difficult to achieve since the syllabus and the knowledge requirements can be, and are, interpreted differently. C. Lundahl (2011:34ff) points to the fact that several reports from Skolverket and Skolinspektionen (The Swedish School Inspection) have detected inequality in teaching and grading, especially with the previous syllabus for English (Lpf 94). The new syllabus and its knowledge requirements are supposed to increase the possibility of equal education along with the National Tests to control how teachers grade students. Nevertheless, it is crucial that teachers, who are ultimately the ones who carry out grading, discuss amongst themselves how this should be done aiming at equality.

3.2.2 The knowledge requirements for English 5
The knowledge requirements are perhaps not as explicit as the syllabus and demand thorough studying before they can be used. Three of the grades in the knowledge requirements E-A are described, these are the grades E, C and A. For the grade D, all the requirements for the grade E must be fulfilled as well as most of the requirements for the grade C; the same principle applies for the grade B. The grades D and B hence correspond to the previously and informally used G+ and VG+ (Skolverket 2011a [www]; C. Lundahl 2011:34). The different grades demand different levels of quality of the same knowledge, which means that the
descriptions of the grades are the same but differ in use of vocabulary. The following extracts from the knowledge requirements are examples of how the requirements for the different grades differ in the use of vocabulary (the words in bold signal the elevated knowledge quality for the different grades respectively):

For the grade E in English 5 the student should be able to understand the main contents and clear details of spoken English of varying speed, as well as clearly written English of different genres. The grade C demands that the student understands the main contents and essential details of spoken English of varying speed, as well as clearly written English of different genres. For an A the student should be able to understand the whole content as well as the details of spoken English of varying speed, as well as clearly written English of different genres (Skolverket 2011e [www]. My translation.).

Hence, there is a progression in the knowledge requirements and the related grades that need to be studied and understood by teacher colleagues before it can be applied in practice, since it is still seemingly open to interpretation.

4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the results of the study, based on the answers from the interviews with the six teachers of English. The results are analysed and discussed in connection to the research questions which are answered in the different sections respectively.

4.1 Informing the students of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements

This section deals with three of the questions asked during the interviews (Appendix 1); the first one is question number 1:

*How do you interpret the new syllabus and its knowledge requirements? What advantages and disadvantages do you see with these?*

Margareta thinks that the new syllabus and its knowledge requirements are “strict and have a clearer structure than previously”. She also mentions that she appreciates that the new textbooks for English are designed to match the new syllabus and its knowledge requirements, which facilitates teaching and also provides for equal teaching. The previous syllabus and its grading criteria were, in Margareta’s opinion, more open to interpretation. For equal teaching to be possible, however, Margareta emphasises that teachers need to have a continuous dialogue on the subject to prevent that interpretations of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements become individualised.

Anna thinks that the new syllabus and its knowledge requirements are similar to the
previous, but that “they are a bit rigid”. They are stricter and less interpretable which means that they demand teachers to study them thoroughly and repeatedly to be able to use them right, which is time-consuming. Anna adds, however, that she thinks that they will prove to be better than the previous syllabus and grading criteria in due time. Equal teaching and, ultimately, grading will be possible due to more grades in the knowledge requirements, Anna concludes.

Peter shares Margareta’s and Anna’s opinions concerning the new syllabus and its knowledge requirements. He adds further that he especially likes that the section ‘Goals to reach’\(^3\) has been replaced by areas of ‘Central contents’\(^4\); the different areas under Central contents in the syllabus are, according to Peter, easier to work with.

Sara appreciates that the new syllabus focuses more on communicative competence. She also thinks that the new knowledge requirements are easier to work with; there is “finally a grade for the pluses and minuses” and by that she refers to the plus or minus that previously could accompany a grade, e.g. G, but which did not actually mean anything more than the grade G in the end. The new grades make it possible to distinguish between a ‘plus’ and a ’minus’ in that there are actual grades for them; a G roughly corresponds to an E, while a G+ corresponds to a D (C. Lundahl 2011:34).

Helene thinks that the new syllabus and its knowledge requirements differ little from the previous one; this means that “it’s easy to get stuck in the old way of working”, Helene says. She also adds that it is more difficult to explain to the students why they get a certain grade and motivate that by referring to “the fuzzy knowledge requirements”.

Bertil shares Helene’s opinion regarding the ‘fuzziness’ of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements. He specifically considers the knowledge requirements as fuzzy in that they are the same for all grades except for the variation in words describing the level of quality that the students are supposed to have reached for the different grades respectively; Bertil thinks that it is “too abstract and open to interpretation.”

The opinions regarding the new syllabus and its knowledge requirements differ among the teachers; some teachers think that they are still too open for interpretation while some think that they are more explicit than previously. This indicates that a discussion between teachers regarding how the syllabus and the knowledge requirements should be interpreted and used is crucial for equal teaching. Another indication is that, since the syllabus and the knowledge requirements are rather new, teachers may be in need of further education

---

3 Swedish ’mål att uppnå’. Skolverket, Lpf 94.
4 Lgy 2011.
regarding their use.

The second question dealt with is interview question number 2:

*Do you inform your students of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements? If yes, how?*

Margareta informs her students of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements at the beginning of each new semester by giving them a copy of it. Margareta and her students then look at and discuss it regularly throughout the semester and especially before tests. Anna uses the same method of informing her students, but she also includes the syllabus and the knowledge requirements in her written plan for the semester which she gives the students. Peter gives his students a paper copy of the preliminary plan for the semester where he includes the knowledge requirements for the grade E; the rest of the knowledge requirements and the syllabus are accessible to the students via the school’s web-based study forum. Sara and Helene include the parts of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements that are relevant for separate tasks and assignments. They also discuss with their students how the requirements are relevant for the tasks and assignments in question. Bertil gives his students a copy of the syllabus and they discuss it together. He also explains to his students the importance of learning the four language skills reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The fact that all teachers do inform their students of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements indicates that they have understood the importance of doing so in order for the students to be able to consciously aim to fulfil them. It also indicates that the teachers have taken a first crucial step in the direction of successful formative assessment (C. Lundahl 2011:12).

The third question dealt with is interview question number 3:

*Do you plan your teaching in accordance with the syllabus and the knowledge requirements? How?*

All six interviewees do plan their teaching on the basis of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements. Sara and Helene say that “the syllabus and the knowledge requirements regulate the teaching to a certain extent” while Bertil says “Yes of course! They form the basis for the assessment and grading”. None of the interviewees gave a concrete example of how they plan their teaching in accordance with the syllabus and the knowledge requirements, i.e. the follow-up question ‘How?’ was not explicitly answered. One could, however, speculate that the teachers believed it to be obvious how teaching is planned in accordance with the syllabus and the knowledge requirements since they, as well as the author, have
experience from planning and conducting teaching. Furthermore, it is a question of interpretation when it comes to planning teaching based on the syllabus and its knowledge requirements. The six teachers do not plan and conduct teaching based on a single interpretation of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements, but on six individual interpretations.

The above presented results do not only answer the three interview questions, but also research question number 1:

*How do the teachers inform the students of the knowledge requirements of the syllabus and how to fulfil them?*

The answer to this question is that all the interviewed teachers inform their students of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements at the beginning of each new semester; most of the teachers provide their students with a copy of it and it is also made available on the school’s web-based study forum. Two of the teachers include relevant parts of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements in separate tasks to clarify and motivate the aim of the tasks further. In conclusion, the interviewees seem to be well aware of what is expected of them in terms of informing the students of what they need to do to fulfil the contents of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements, which is also what C. Lundahl (2011:12) points out. This result also agrees with the method of formative assessment which emphasises students’ involvement in, and responsibility for their own learning process; the teaching and the learning is hence made visible to the teachers and the students (Hattie 2009:25; ibid. 2011:12).

**4.2 Formative assessment and feedback on students’ performance**

This section deals with formative assessment and feedback in general, and with different types of assessment and feedback in particular (self-assessment is dealt with in the next section). Three of the interview questions are dealt with here; the first one is question number 4:

*What types of tasks do you assess? Tests, homework, written assignments, oral presentations, group work, National Tests, etc.?*

The first spontaneous answer from all of the interviewees was “Everything!” They claim that they, one way or another, assess everything that their students do. This does not only include tasks, tests and assignments of various kinds, but also the students’ activities during class, such as speaking and writing. The teachers’ answers agree with what the syllabus (Skolverket
2011b, e [www]) states in terms of what should be assessed; everything that the students do throughout the course in the subject English should be assessed and also taken into account when the students are graded at the end of the course.

The second of the interview questions dealt with is question number 5:

*How do you assess the tasks? Grades, scores, comments, etc.?*

Margareta uses comments only; she explains that her students have requested that she gives them extensive written comments so that they become aware of what they have done less well with and how they can improve. She does not think that tasks should be graded during a semester since she considers this to be misguiding; grades should only be given at the end of a semester (a preliminary grade) or a course. Margareta believes that comments can help and motivate the students in their learning process to a greater extent than grades.

Anna uses grades, written comments and scores in the assessment of the students’ assignments. She does not see any problem in combining different types of assessment since different tasks require different assessment tools. When Anna gives her students assignments to do at home, she marks them with points from 1 to 5, where 5 is the best. She explains that since she cannot ascertain that the students have completed the assignments independently and without cheating, she cannot grade such assignments. When Anna corrects written assignments she underlines or marks the students’ errors, but she lets the students correct them. Anna motivates this by referring to the knowledge requirements for English which state that students should be able to make improvements of their own work (Skolverket 2011e [www]).

Peter uses written comments only, while Sara and Helene combine written comments with grades. Sara and Helene explain that they prefer to give comments but their students request grades. When there are large tests5 in English that all students take, they are returned with grades based on a rating scale for the sake of equality. Essays are always commented on and returned to the students for correction and improvement, again, in accordance with the knowledge requirements. All the interviewed teachers are consistent in giving grades on these large tests and comments on essays.

It is interesting that the teachers use the same assessment methods on these large tests but not in the assessment of their students on other tasks. One reason could be that the large tests are preparatory for the National Tests, which have guidelines on how to correct and

---

5 The large tests are preparatory to the National Tests.
grade them, and therefore are treated in the same way by all teachers.

The third question dealt with in this section is interview question number 6:

*How do you work with feedback and what sort of feedback do you give? Oral and/or written?*

All the interviewed teachers keep written records of their students’ achievements and performance and inform their students orally before the teacher-student-parent conferences. Peter says that his students ask him regularly for feedback which he then gives them orally; “the students want to know their preliminary grades but since I don’t grade them until the end of the course I explain to them how they have done so far and what they need to work on” Peter says. Peter also gives spontaneous feedback during class, which Sara and Helene do too. They also explain that they talk to their students a couple of times each semester about their performance and what they need to improve. Anna mentions that a few students, however, do not seem to embrace the feedback and therefore they do not improve their performance. These students are usually underachievers and need to make an effort to fulfil the requirements of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements. Sara and Helene ascertain that they do their best to give constructive feedback but they conclude that it is the lack of the students’ motivation that is the problem. Bertil says “I put all the cards on the table”; he refers to the fact that he informs all of his students of what ‘level’ they are at in terms of fulfilling the knowledge requirements.

The three questions dealt with in this section also answer research question number 2:

*What sort of feedback do the teachers give the students?*

Margareta and Peter use written comments only on tests and assignments, which is in accordance with Butler’s (1988) findings; written comments lead to students’ improvement more so than grades, and significantly more so than a combination of written comments and grades. Anna, Helene and Sara, however, use a combination of comments and grades; Anna motivates this by saying that different tasks require different assessment methods, while Helene and Sara say that they do so to meet their students’ requests for grades. However, extensive written comments are still recommended in formative assessment and if the students prefer grades and think that grades are more rewarding, they are yet to discover the benefits of extensive comments, and it is the teachers’ responsibility to implement them. Furthermore, the inconsistency in the teachers’ assessment methods, except on large tests, indicates that a discussion between teacher colleagues might be necessary regarding what sort of feedback (comments and/or grades) to give the students.
The teachers keep written records of their students’ achievements and performance and inform their students orally before the teacher-student-parent conferences. Spontaneous feedback is given during class and whenever a student asks for it. The feedback is given both orally and in written form; this applies not only to feedback, but also to the formative assessment. Since feedback is an important feature of formative assessment it should be carried out with the aim to increase the students’ performance in their learning process (Black & Wiliam 1998:10).

4.3 Students’ self-assessment and follow-up on assessment

This section deals with students’ self-assessment, which is an important part of their learning process as well as a knowledge requirement to be fulfilled. How teachers follow up assessment, which is a way of measuring how the students’ progress, will also be dealt with. The first interview question addressed is question number 7:

*Do your students do any type of self-assessment? In what form?*

Margareta lets her students write about their own performance and evaluate it; they are asked to explain how they think they have done so far and how they plan to keep working to improve. Anna speaks to her students individually about their performance in the same way as Margareta does, except Anna does not ask her students to do a written evaluation. Peter also speaks to his students individually but plans to introduce written evaluation i.e. self-assessment as well. The reason why Peter has not implemented written self-assessment yet is lack of time. Sara did not answer this question, but Helene lets her students assess themselves in written form in the same way as Margareta’s students. Bertil’s students do not assess themselves unless Bertil considers any of them in danger of not fulfilling the knowledge requirements.

Research question number 3 *How do the students assess their own performance, and if so, how is self-assessment carried out?* is answered in that students’ self-assessment vary between oral and written assessment. Furthermore, students’ self-assessment is not implemented to any great extent by the six teachers. It is interesting, however, that Margareta, who has worked the longest as a teacher, lets her students assess themselves in the most thorough way. It cannot be established why she works with students’ self-assessment more than her colleagues, but it is possible that she has developed this method throughout the years as a teacher. It is also interesting, but perhaps not surprising, that Peter, who has worked as a teacher for less than two years, plans to introduce his students to more thorough written self-
assessment. Peter may be more up-dated on the features of formative assessment since he only recently graduated from the teacher training programme.

On the one hand, self-assessment is, according to Black and Wiliam (1998:8), crucial if formative assessment is to be productive. According to B. Lundahl (2009:400), self-assessment requires that students are aware of what is expected of them, i.e. they need to understand the contents of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements, which the students do. On the other hand, the teachers need to familiarise themselves with the methods of students’ self-assessment and implement them, which does not seem to be the case here, and which seems to apply to Swedish schools in general.

The second question dealt with is interview question number 8:

*How do you follow up assessment and do you see any improvements over time?*

This question covers the question about feedback in the previous section as well as the question about students’ self-assessment in this section i.e. how feedback and self-assessment are followed up.

The feedback that the teachers give their students orally has also been documented in written form by the teachers so that results can be compared and improvements measured from one time to the next, usually before each teacher-student-parent conference. The written documentation is then up-dated regularly. Since the interviewed teachers work differently with their students and their self-assessment, there is no general answer to how self-assessment is followed up. Furthermore, the teachers do not let their students assess themselves to any great extent. What can be said is that the teachers who do work with self-assessment of their students do follow it up regularly; Margareta’s and Helene’s students do written self-assessment approximately 1-2 times per semester, while Peter’s and Anna’s students do oral self-assessment the same number of times. Conclusively, feedback and self-assessment is followed up but in different ways depending on the teachers’ different methods.

Improvements are made by most of the students over time, mainly due to the teachers’ feedback. By informing the students of what they need to work on and how, most students embrace the feedback and do indeed improve. A few of Anna’s students however do not embrace the feedback, usually due to lack of motivation, and do not improve throughout the course of the subject.

The fact that the teachers do see improvements in their students’ performance over time due to assessment is positive since the students receive different types of feedback on written tests and assignments. Referring again to Butler’s (1988) findings, where extensive written
comments proved to be the key to the students’ improvements, the interviewees’ students have proven the contrary; most of them do improve regardless of what type of feedback they get. Improvements are also seen in the students’ results, despite the rare use of self-assessment, which is also positive since it is contrary to what Black and Wiliam (1998:8) claim, i.e. that students’ self-assessment is crucial for productive formative assessment. It could be that regular oral feedback during class in combination with the teachers’ documentation of, and follow-up on the students’ performance, is more valuable than the assessment of written assignments and the students’ self-assessment. It is, perhaps, in the spontaneous, as well as in the more formal discussions between the teacher and the student regarding his/her performance, that the main formative assessment takes place and which, ultimately, leads to improvement. In summary, research question number 4 How is assessment followed up throughout the course and can any improvements be seen due to the teachers’ and students’ efforts? is hereby considered to be answered.

4.4 The grading process; summative assessment

In this section two of the interview questions are dealt with; the first one is question number 9:

Do you grade separate tasks?

As mentioned in Section 4.2, Margareta and Peter never grade separate tasks but use comments only. Anna does grade some types of tests; when the students are tested on a specific section of the syllabus Anna gives grades since she believes that it is a possible and fair measurement of a specific section. However, this does not mean that the grade on the test will guarantee the same grade at the end of the course; some areas are tested several times. Sara and Helene prefer to give comments on tasks but since “the students ask for grades”, they give both comments and grades. According to Sara and Helene, their students desperately want grades, especially on tests, since the students say that grades motivate them to do better next time but also that grades are a sort of reward for their efforts if they do well. Sara and Helene explain further that grades on separate tests are not a guarantee for the same grade at the end of the course. Bertil grades the large tests that all students take, which applies to all of the other interviewed teachers as well. When the teachers give the students grades on separate tasks, the assessment is summative rather than formative in that a grade supposedly should reflect the quality of the knowledge the student has acquired in relation to the knowledge requirements and this can only be measured at the end of a course (C. Lundahl
However, specific sections can be tested and graded if they are not tested again, but since this does not seem to be the case, the tests should not be graded. Furthermore, the syllabus and the knowledge requirements for English are not designed so that specific areas can be tested only once; the contents of the syllabus is rather thought to be practiced and developed throughout the course of the subject and the quality of the knowledge that the students have displayed is then graded in relation to the knowledge requirements.

The second interview question dealt with in this section is question number 10:

*How do you grade your students? What are the grades based on?*

Common for all the interviewed teachers is that they take all the various tasks, tests, assignments and classroom activities in consideration when they determine the final grades for their students at the end of the course. Margareta says that she considers all the different assignments to be of equal importance for the final grade. Anna agrees with Margareta and adds that “sometimes the National Tests are given too much significance in the final grade, but I don’t consider them any more important than any other assignment that I’ve given my students”. Contrary to Anna’s opinion regarding the significance of the National Tests, Bertil thinks that they are “a proof of what the students have actually learnt”. Anna argues that “a student may have a bad day and do poorly on the National Tests but that shouldn’t affect the student’s final grade” and further that “what is important is that s/he has fulfilled the requirements for the grade that s/he gets in the end”. Peter, Sara and Helene give the same explanation to their grading process as Margareta and Anna mention; they all give their students grades based on whether the knowledge requirements are fulfilled or not at the end of a course. The reason why the teachers have different opinions about the significance of the National Tests lie in the interpretation of their importance; the National Tests are supposed to enable fair grading and are also a way of controlling how teachers grade students (Skolverket 2011d [www]). However, the opinions expressed by the teachers rather concern the significance of the National Tests *in comparison* to other tests, tasks and assignments. Thus, it is a question of whether the students’ grades on the National Tests should have a significant effect on the students’ final grades or not, and that is where opinions differ between the teachers.

The interview questions dealt with in this section cannot answer the last research question in isolation, but are considered as a complement to the next section where the research question is answered.
4.5 Formative and summative assessment in symbiosis?

The final research question *How does formative assessment affect summative assessment and to what extent?* is answered in this section, based on the answers to the interview questions in the previous section as well as the following two interview questions:

11. *Do you focus more on formative assessment or summative assessment and grading?*
12. *What advantages/disadvantages do you see with formative and summative assessment and grading?*

All the interviewed teachers answered that they indeed focus more on formative assessment since it is the students’ learning process that leads to their final grades. Another common answer from all the teachers is that formative assessment means a lot of documentation of their students’ performance, which is time-consuming, but which ultimately facilitates determining the final grades. Margareta says “it’s ok for the students to have bad days during the semester and they can still reach the goals in the end”. She develops this further by saying that “if a student does poorly on one thing they will be given more chances to prove that they can reach the goals”. Peter considers the final grade as a proof of what the students have learnt and that the grade should reflect everything that the students have done throughout the course; otherwise there would be no point in doing all the different types of tasks, assignments and test. Sara, Helene and Bertil all say that the final grades come as no surprise to their students since they have had a dialogue with them throughout the course regarding their performance and achievements.

In summary, the teachers consider the advantages of formative assessment to be the certainty with which they can grade their students. Peter and Helene also mention that they want their students to progress throughout the course of English, which formative assessment encourages. The disadvantage of formative assessment is that it is time-consuming. Due to the advantages of formative assessment the teachers do not see any disadvantages in summative assessment and grading. The advantage of summative assessment and grading is that these processes are facilitated by the formative assessment made throughout the course. The author hereby considers the fifth and final research question to be answered.

5 CONCLUSION

This study has investigated how six teachers of English in a Swedish upper secondary school work with assessment and grading in general, and with formative and summative assessment in particular. The aim of the study was to investigate how the theoretical guidelines of
assessment research are implemented in teaching and whether the teachers’ and the students’ joint efforts lead to improvements or not.

Formative assessment, which mainly focuses on feedback from teachers and students’ self-assessment, was found to be implemented to a certain extent. Feedback from teachers and students’ self-assessment is only possible if the students are aware of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements (C. Lundahl 2011:12); it is in relation to this that the teacher can give feedback and the students can assess themselves. The results showed that the teachers thought that their students were well informed of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements and also of what the teachers expected of the students.

The type of written feedback that the teachers gave their students on tests and other written assignments varied between extensive written comments and grades. In formative assessment grades are not to be given on separate tasks and therefore this result indicates that the six teachers are not consistent in their assessment methods and formative assessment is hence not implemented in accordance with assessment research. If students are to be able to improve throughout the course in the subject English, they would, according to Butler’s (1988) study, benefit from extensive written comments rather than from grades. Furthermore, the teachers gave their students regular oral feedback, which they also documented and used for the teacher-student-parent conferences as a follow-up on the students’ performance. The results indicated that oral feedback seemed to lead to students’ improvement more so than written feedback, even if written feedback contributed as well. This conclusion was based on the fact that the teachers did not work with the students’ self-assessment to any great extent. The fact that the results showed that most students improved regardless of what type of feedback they received is contrary to what has been previously documented in assessment research (Butler 1988) and would therefore be interesting to investigate further.

The teachers’ grading processes, i.e. their summative assessments were very similar in that all six teachers took everything into account that the students had done throughout the course of the subject, which is also well in line with what assessment research suggests (C. Lundahl 2011:129). However, the teachers’ opinions differed regarding the significance of the National Tests; some thought that the students’ grades on the National Tests were of greater importance for their final grades, while others considered them to be equally important as other tests or tasks, including classroom activities. Another important result was that despite the fact that some of the teachers gave their students grades on separate tests and tasks, this never guaranteed the same grade at the end of the course; all six teachers ascertained that the students were graded at the end in relation to how well they had met the knowledge
requirements of the syllabus. In terms of how formative and summative assessment can function together and how these two assessment methods affect one another, the results showed that all six teachers found formative assessment to be an advantage and which benefited summative assessment. Despite being time-consuming, formative assessment facilitates the grading process since the grades, according to the teachers, are based on all the assessment, documentation and follow-up made throughout the course.

A more general conclusion, based on the results, is that there seems to be a need for teachers to get more education in formative assessment so that they can implement feedback and students’ self-assessment fully and successfully. Teachers also need to discuss more with their colleagues in order to be consistent in their assessment methods. It was mentioned in the introduction of this study that grading, and hence the learning product, is in general, more focused on than the learning process; that was not the case with the six teachers in this study. Despite the teachers’ perhaps insufficient theoretical knowledge and practical implementation of formative assessment, the results of this study showed that the teachers are well on their way in terms of implementing formative assessment. One of the main reasons why this was not yet done is because the teachers already considered formative assessment to be time-consuming. One solution to this problem could be for the teachers to work closer together instead of individually, and design working assessment methods which they could all use; this way the heavy work-load could be spread amongst all six teachers. Furthermore, the results point to a need for more teamwork and discussions between colleagues, especially regarding the interpretation of the syllabus and the knowledge requirements in order for equal teaching and grading to be possible.

The results of this study have provided an overview of how teachers work with formative and summative assessment, and it has also spotted a need for more education in these assessment methods. The aim of this study has hence been reached.

The fact that the teachers happily participated in the interviews and shared their viewpoints, as well as their teaching methods, could be seen as a strength of this study. Furthermore, despite the fact that the number of interviewees (six) might be considered as low, the interviewed teachers are all of different ages and have varying teaching experience; the teachers hence contributed with a wide range of experiences which is a strength. It is also a strength that the teachers were interviewed separately, except in one case, which resulted in individual and authentic answers; the teachers were not, to the authors’ knowledge, influenced by one another.
This study is of use for other teachers and education researchers, and especially for those who seek to investigate and learn more about the use of assessment practice in Swedish schools. The method and material used in this study could advantageously be used for similar investigations in other schools and parts of Sweden and result in a comparison of the use of assessment practice in different regions. For a more extensive study, the method could be supplemented with student interviews and questionnaires; these could possibly contribute to an overview of how the teachers’ methods affect the students. It could also contribute to visualise how the students experience their influence on the teaching as well as their results. This study could be seen as a more general study and also be developed further; since the results point to an increased need for teachers to get more education in formative assessment in general, and feedback and students’ self-assessment in particular, these two areas could be studied in detail.
REFERENCES

Primary sources

Interviews with six English teachers in an upper secondary school in the south of Sweden. 5-6 March 2012.

Secondary sources


Skolverket (2011d). *Om nationella prov.*


APPENDIX 1

Interview questions for English teachers in upper secondary school regarding formative and summative assessment and grading.

Gender:
Age:
For how long have you worked as a teacher? On what level?
What education do you have?
What other subjects do you teach?

1. How do you interpret the new syllabus and its knowledge requirements? What advantages and disadvantages do you see with these?
2. Do you inform your students of the syllabus and its knowledge requirements? If yes, how?
3. Do you plan your teaching in accordance with the syllabus and the knowledge requirements? How?
4. What types of tasks do you assess? Tests, homework, written assignments, oral presentations, group work, National Tests etc.?
5. How do you assess the tasks? Grades, scores, comments etc.?
6. How do you work with feedback and what sort of feedback do you give? Oral and/or written?
7. Do your students do any type of self-assessment? In what form?
8. How do you follow up assessment and do you see any improvements over time?
9. Do you grade separate tasks?
10. How do you grade your students? What are the grades based on?
11. Do you focus more on formative assessment or summative assessment and grading?
12. What advantages/disadvantages do you see with formative and summative assessment and grading?