

The Challenge of Teaching English in a Heterogeneous Classroom

Anette Svensson

The present study aims to explore in what ways teachers at upper secondary level work in a diverse classroom with particular focus on the students' heterogeneous knowledge of the English language. This heterogeneity, the participants experience, is primarily caused by the discrepancy between those students who use English to a great extent outside the classroom through, for example, frequently playing computer games, and those students who do not use the English language at all outside a school context. In order to explore this aim, a pilot study was conducted where five teachers at upper secondary level were interviewed. The results show that this heterogeneity is their most challenging part of working as English teachers today. It thus adds to other factors, such as, multiculturalism, multilingualism, difficulties with reading and writing etc. and makes it an even more difficult task for teachers to support every student's individualised learning. The results further show that despite the teachers' attempts to differentiate the English education, there is a lack of, and need for, strategies that are useful to support an individualised learning in a heterogeneous classroom.

Keywords: differentiation, diversity, heterogeneity, individualised learning, second language acquisition

Anette Svensson, senior lecturer, Jönköping University,
anette.svensson@ju.se

Introduction

Despite a Language Act (2009) that protects the Swedish language (SOU 2009:600), influences from English are increasing on a regular basis (The Swedish Institute) much due to the Internet (see for example, Estling Van-

nestål 2009), movies, and TV (see for example, Asp 2011). Young people grow up as “digital natives” (Prensky 2001) and learn English in an informal context at a very young age (Cabau 2009; Sundqvist 2009; Sundqvist & Sylvén 2012). However, not all young people watch movies in the English language without subtitles and partake in participatory cultures, for example, read and write blogs, take an active part in discussion forums online, or write English fan fiction. As a result of the discrepancy between those students who use English to a great extent through, for example, frequently playing computer games and those students who do not use the English language at all outside a school context, a Swedish classroom contains students of highly heterogeneous knowledge concerning the English language, in this article referred to as *heterogeneity* and *the heterogeneous classroom*.

While heterogeneity is used with this specific meaning in this article, the concept *diversity* is used as an umbrella term which encompasses heterogeneity as well as other factors that also cause discrepancy between students, such as socio-economic factors, multilingualism, multiculturalism etc., factors that contribute to *the diverse classroom*. English teachers are thus required to juggle an exceedingly heterogeneous and diverse class. Presumably, this phenomenon does not differ that much from the situation in other Nordic and non-Nordic countries where English is a highly influential language and is taught as a foreign language in school. Hence, this pilot study has implications for teacher educators and teachers of English as a foreign or second language on a global scale.

Background

Second Language Acquisition Today

Research on second language acquisition has developed since the cognitive revolution, after which it was primarily considered a cognitive linguistic process (Atkinson 2011: 3), to experience a “social turn” and thus deviate from the strictly cognitive aspect of the process. The main difference between the cognitive and the social aspects is that “the former draws from *psychological* and the latter from *socially oriented explanations* for L2 learning and associated constructs” (Ortega 2011: 168, original italics).¹ When social aspects are regarded as contributing to the language learning process, the social and cultural contexts in which this learning takes place become

¹ L2 refers to the second language or foreign language a person knows or learns in addition to his or her native language (L1).

important elements to analyse. The postcolonial societies that exist in large parts of the world today are used to working with features of globalisation and hybridity (Ortega 2011: 170), features that contribute not only to second language acquisition, but also to a multicultural and multilingual society where culture and language are strongly associated with power and status.

In addition to these features, questions about identity creation are significantly affecting the language learning process. It is necessary, Norton and McKinney (2011) claim, not only to integrate “the individual language learner and the social world”, but also to illuminate “how relations of power in the social world affect learners’ access to the target language community” (73). These ideas mirror a socio-cultural perspective on the learning process as influenced by outer power structures together with the social and cultural contexts where learning has effect, as well as by inner cognitive processes, and can thus be seen as one simplified way to summarise the large field of second language acquisition today.

Second Language Acquisition and the Diverse Classroom

There is research conducted that focuses on diversity in the classroom (see for example, Maitzen 1997) and more particularly in the second language classroom (see for example, Liu & Nelson, 2017). As Maitzen (1997) discusses the battle between multiculturalist and individualist theories of education, he asserts that the “attempt to accommodate both multiculturalism and individualism in the classroom inevitably makes for incoherent pedagogy” (293). Drawing upon the Assistant Director of the Office of Equal Opportunities at Cornell University, Maitzen argues that “we should look on diversity not as something negative or even neutral, but as something positive and valuable” (294). As Liu and Nelson also focuses on diversity in the classroom, they relate to Maitzen’s research as they claim that “diversity is the only constant feature of L2 education” (1). Indeed, diversity might arguably be seen as normality not only in an L2 classroom, but in many diverse classrooms. Relating to the conflict between the individualist and the multiculturalist approaches, Liu and Nelson (2017) further claim that “this conflict arises when we attempt to treat students as individuals separate from socially constructed categories such as gender, race, religion, and orientation, but also as knowers of things that arise specifically from experience with culture, gender, race, and other such constructs” (1). The various aspects of diversity that are brought up, for example, culture, gender, race, religion, and

sexual orientation, are all highly significant in all forms of educational contexts including L2 education.

In a study of culturally and linguistically diverse students in an academic context, Gonzalez, Pagan, Wendell, and Love (2011) focus predominantly on ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity in the American classroom. “For these students to develop and learn optimally,” they argue, “teachers must be prepared to meet diverse developmental, cultural, linguistic, and education needs” (v). Though this study focuses on the US, this is clearly true for other countries as well, including Sweden. Gonzalez et al. further state: “Today, every classroom teacher is an ELL/ESL teacher” (v). In the wake of global mobility, this is a highly relevant topic that relates to various classrooms around the world.

In line with Maitzen, Liu and Nelson, and Gonzalez et al., Dreyer and van der Walt (1996) as well as Kinsella (1996) focus on the positive effects of teaching in a diverse classroom as they discuss the empowering of teachers as well as students through adopting various teaching and learning styles in order to perform better in terms of meeting the academic goals (Dreyer & van der Walt 1996), and through supporting various teaching styles through designing group work aimed at developing the unique progresses of learners.

In an article focusing on multilingual aspects of the teacher education, Carlsson (2009) discusses the “new” Sweden and the effects immigration has on the Swedish society from a political as well as an educational perspective (39-40). Above all, she discusses the impact of the increased internationalisation and globalisation which have made Sweden multilingual (39, 40). As a result of this “new” development, the Swedish education system and its faculty have a new commission, and the need for broader and deeper competences, in particular regarding culture and language education, is increasing:

An integral part of the new education commission is to function in a society characterised by ethnic and cultural multiplicity. [...] On the one hand, this situation places higher demands on the teachers to be educated for a work in a multicultural pre-school, school, and adult education, and, on the other hand, demands that they develop an ability to prepare children and young people for a life in a multicultural society. (The Government: Proposition (1999/2000:135): *En förnyad lärarutbildning*: 8-9, my translation)

The increased demands placed on the teacher education, that Carlsson discusses in her article, are directed towards teachers in the multicultural classroom where the main focus is the linguistic as well as the cultural experiences the students *bring with* them into the classroom, and the linguistic and cultural experiences they need to *take with* them when leaving school and living in Sweden today.

The multicultural and multilingual classroom also places higher demands on experienced teachers. Tatar and Horenczyk (2003) claim that “[d]uring the last decades, teachers have had to face new challenges when dealing with heterogeneous populations posing radically different educational, social, and psychological demands” (397). As a result of this increasingly diverse classroom, Tatar and Horenczyk suggest that “the stress and difficulties involved in working with a culturally diverse student body can contribute to professional burnout among teachers” (2003: 398). It is thus not only the quality of the education, but also the health of the teachers that need to be considered when discussing the diverse classroom.

The present study and its discussion about the specific form of diversity, heterogeneity, brought into the classroom by the students’ various knowledge about the English language add to the on-going discussion about the diverse classroom that is affected by multicultural, multilingual, and socio-economic aspects, since the experiences the students bring into the classroom are characterised by their social as well as their cultural capital.

One aspect of this plural classroom that is specifically significant for language education is the official as well as the unofficial status a language holds. The Swedish Language Act that came into effect in 2009 should “protect the Swedish language and language diversity in Sweden, and the individual’s access to language” (SOU 2009:600, Section 2). Hence, the Swedish-speaking people need to make sure that the Swedish language maintains its official status against above all the English language. At the same time, they need to promote linguistic plurality, so that it is not a dual choice of “Swedish or English” that exists in today’s global society. Lindberg (2009) argues that “the strength of one language in relation to other languages depends on historic, economic, social, and political factors in the relationship between groups and nations, that affect speakers of different languages and the relationships between them in various ways” (10, my translation). The status of a language is thus not static, but rather dynamic and utmost impressionable.

At the same time as the Swedish government emphasises the importance of maintaining the status of the Swedish language, they also emphasise the importance for students, as for Swedish people in general, to acquire a good knowledge of English (Lindberg 2009: 10). There is a big risk that the English language will gain the highest status, which in turn would mean

a risk for an increased social division between people with good knowledge of English and thus access to prestigious positions in society, and people with limited or no knowledge of English, who would thus be marginalised and excluded from the possibility to reach important and influential positions in society. (Lindberg 2009: 11, my translation)

A development where the English language is gaining status in relation to Swedish can be seen in academia where students in, above all, natural sciences, technology, and medicine use English as the main professional language (Gunnarsson 2004: 215). This division, that might potentially be transferred to society at large, between those who do and those who do not know English, might already exist among the students in a Swedish classroom depending on their heterogeneous knowledge of English, a heterogeneity that to a large degree depends on their various exposure to the English language in a recreational context (see for example, Sundqvist 2009; Cabau 2009; Sundqvist & Sylvén 2012). In her research on out-of-school English, Sundqvist concludes that “activities in English outside of school have an impact both on their [the ninth-graders who participated in her study] level of oral proficiency and on the size of their vocabulary” (2009: 207). The difference in young people’s use of English also has a larger democratic significance.

Second Language Acquisition and the Heterogeneous Classroom

When it comes to English language education in Sweden, one needs to take the students’ heterogeneous knowledge of English into consideration. This heterogeneity contributes even more to the already diverse classroom. One thing that clearly affects the students’ knowledge of English is that Sweden is a multimodal society (Erixon 2012: 2) and people have access to the Internet where English is the most frequently used language. Films and TV-series/programmes are subtitled so that viewers hear English while watching films and TV. Young people are considered as mass consumers of these media forms (The Swedish Media Council 2015), as they grow up in what

Livingstone refers to as a “screen culture” (2002), which means that they acquire knowledge in an informal context through audial, visual, and multi-modal media forms, of which a large part is in English. One effect of a society where many young people grow up in a “screen culture” and are familiar with the English language is that today’s classrooms are not only diverse in relation to multiculturalism and multilingualism, but also in relation to the student’s heterogeneous knowledge of English as well as their knowledge of digital media (see for example, Svensson, 2008; Estling Vannestål, 2009; Vigmo, 2010).

Sundqvist and Sylvén (2012) see the heterogeneous classroom in Sweden as an effect of English being a highly influential language in the Swedish society and is used in a recreational context particularly by young people (121). While their study approaches the heterogeneous classroom from a student-perspective, the present study focuses on teachers’ experiences of working in a heterogeneous classroom. In their study, Sundqvist and Sylvén notice that it is significant for teachers to acknowledge the informal learning of the students in order to adjust the formal learning so that it is individually adapted to suit every student’s learning progress (121). It is thus important that teachers familiarise themselves with their students’ knowledge of English as well as of their use of English in a recreational context.

The fact that students display a heterogeneous knowledge of English is not a new phenomenon, but since the status of the English language is increasing in the Swedish society at large and the use of English as a lingua franca in social media has increased, it is safe to assume that Swedish students are more heterogeneous regarding their knowledge of English today than 20 years ago, that is, before the spread of the Internet.

Differentiation in a Heterogeneous Classroom

In order for teachers to support students’ individualised learning, they need to be familiar with every student’s knowledge in the subject, as well as which areas they find easy and which areas that are challenging for the them. There are various interpretations of what individualised learning entails, as Sundén (2011) points out: “an education planned so that every student may increase their knowledge as much as possible – or, an education that places the responsibility on the student him- or herself in the individual working process” (Sundén 2011: n.pag. my translation). In the steering documents for the upper secondary school in Sweden, it is stated that the education should

be adjusted to every student's abilities and needs (Skolverket 2011: 3, my translation) and that the teachers should "adjust the planning of the education as well as its content and methods based on the various abilities and needs of the students (Skolverket 2011: 10, my translation). It is thus the school's (through the teachers) official stance to support every student's individualised learning in order to increase their knowledge. At the same time, the students "should develop their abilities to take initiatives and responsibilities in school, and to work independently as well as together with others" (Skolverket 2011: 4, my translation). Hence, it is the teachers' responsibility to provide every student with an opportunity for an individualised learning.

Differentiation, that is tailoring instruction to meet individual students' needs, is an important, but also huge task, as Tomlinson (2014) points out:

Teachers in differentiated classrooms begin with a clear and solid sense of what constitutes powerful curriculum and engaging instruction. Then they ask what it will take to modify that curriculum and instruction so that each learner comes away with knowledge, understanding, and skills necessary to take on the next important phase of learning. Essentially, teachers in differentiated classrooms accept, embrace, and plan for the fact that learners bring to school both many commonalities and the essential differences that make them individuals. (4)

Differentiation is often a source of worry for many teachers, and the Swedish school and in extension its teachers have been criticised for neither being able to support the low-performing students, nor challenge the high-performing students, which results in a lack of motivation for all students (Kling 2013: n. pag.). In an interview with Kling, Giota suggests that "the teachers need more time to sit down and figure out how every student think and how their passion for learning can be used to their advantage so that they reach the goals" (Kling 2013: n.pag.). In an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous environment, it is thus important that the teachers familiarise themselves with the needs and abilities of every student they teach.

Sundqvist and Olin-Scheller (2015) explore the challenges English teachers face in a heterogeneous classroom. Their study shows that teachers have a strong wish to bridge the gap between the English acquired and used in a recreational context and the English that is used in school (65). One way to bridge this gap is to use teaching methods that include digital techniques and the Internet; methods that shift the power relations from a traditional teach-

ing situation so that the students, who are more familiar with digital techniques, assume a greater responsibility. This shift in power is fruitful when it comes to language education (66). The present study and its discussion about the heterogeneity brought into the classroom by the students' various knowledge of the English language and the need for, or problem with, finding strategies for an individualised learning process, add to the on-going discussion about the diverse classroom that is affected by multicultural, multilingual, and socioeconomic aspects.

Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study was to explore in what ways teachers at upper secondary level work in a heterogeneous classroom with particular focus on the students' diverse knowledge of the English language.² The following research questions have been addressed:

- How do the participants familiarise themselves with the students' knowledge of English when they start upper secondary level?
- Which skills in English do the participants see as most prominent among the students?
- What are the reasons for the students' heterogeneous knowledge of English as experienced by the participants?
- Which material, methods, and strategies, if any, do the participants apply in order to support the students' individualised learning in a heterogeneous classroom?

Method

The present study uses the method of qualitative interviews to highlight the experiences of five English teachers working at upper secondary level in Sweden. More specifically, the study examines how the participating teachers work with providing the students with an individualised learning relating to their heterogeneous knowledge of English. Qualitative studies focus on "finding an understanding of how certain things are experienced. Rather than explaining how things are, these studies aim to reach a deeper understanding of the investigated phenomenon" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Because the

² Upper secondary level is equal to grades 10-12, which means that the students are 16-18 years old.

aim of this study was to analyse teachers' opinions and experiences with regards to heterogeneity in classrooms where English is taught, interviews with practicing teachers were regarded the most appropriate method with which to gather the required information. Due to their "unique flexibility" (Galleta, 2013, p. 2), semi-structured interviews were selected not only for the ability to expand on the participants' answers (Galleta, 2013), but also for their ability to address the exploratory dimensions of the research questions used in this study.

There are of course dangers and difficulties to consider when conducting interviews; the biggest one being that of social desirability. However, the answers given in this study should be considered as honest and truthful since there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the participants.

Participants

Since the aim of this study was to explore English teacher's experiences of students' heterogeneous knowledge of English and working in a heterogeneous classroom, it was relevant to select participants who had some experience of teaching English at upper secondary level. Therefore, an email was sent out to all English teachers with at least five years of experience working at an upper secondary school in central Sweden – a convenience sample. Five teachers responded positively to the email and accepted participation in the study. The participants were informed that participation was anonymous and voluntary, and that they were free to quit the study at any time, in accordance with the ethical principles of The Swedish Research Council. Because the subject English was in focus, it was not relevant which other subjects the participants teach, but as it turned out, four of the teachers also teach Swedish and one teacher only teaches English. In order to preserve the participants' anonymity, they have, in this article, been given aliases. Anne has been working as a teacher at upper secondary level for 15 years, which makes her the participant with the longest experience. Beatrice has 14 years of experience, and Cecilia has been working as a teacher for 9 years. The two teachers with the shortest experience are Dani and Emma with 8 and 6 years of experience respectively. Hence, the participants are all proficient teachers with at least 6 years of experience. This experience means that some of the participants could not only offer their views and ideas on the current situation, but could also offer a perspective over time as they were able to see trends during their teaching careers. Although this is a small convenience sample, the experiences and opinions that form the basis of this study are

likely to be of interest to teacher students, teachers, and researchers of education who might have encountered or most likely will encounter a diverse classroom.

Procedure and Analysis

Each semi-structured interview took place at the teachers' work places and lasted about 30 minutes. The participants were not given the questions in advance. Questions regarding the participants' familiarisation with the students' knowledge of English were explicitly stated, but questions regarding the diversity of the students' knowledge of English were implicitly stated with a purpose not to steer the interviews towards this phenomenon. The interviews, conducted in Swedish, were recorded on an audio recording device with the consent of the participants.

The documented material has been transformed in several steps. After the spoken interviews were recorded, they were transcribed into written text. Even if it was not the initial aim, part of the analysis began when the interviews were transcribed. From the complete transcribed material, the data was sorted thematically based on the research questions without losing the context in which the quote was initially stated. During this selection process, answers clearly not related to any of the research questions, for example several answers relating to the question of what the participants find most rewarding with working as an English teacher at upper secondary school today, were omitted. The answers that were related to the research questions have been translated into English to fit this article and great care has been taken to maintain their spoken form. Hence, adherence to the source statements has been a high priority.

Theory

Diversity Pedagogy Theory (DPT) is, as described by Sheets (2009), a set of principles that point out the natural and inseparable connection between culture and cognition, which means that "to be effective as a teacher, you must understand and acknowledge the critical role culture plays in the teaching-learning process" (11). Following DPT, it is important to "observe cultural behavioural patterns to identify individual and group cultural competencies and skills" and to "use this knowledge to guide their teaching decisions" in order to be culturally inclusive and culturally competent teachers,

which facilitate learning since they “understand how to change and adapt instruction” (11). Sheets (2009) argues that DPT “clearly recognizes *the powerful, active role students play in their learning*. In other words, teachers are extremely important; but students can easily and consistently choose to sabotage, ignore, dismiss, or minimize their significance” (11, original italics). For the teacher to be able to individualize the teaching and learning processes, it is important to familiarise themselves with the students’ prior knowledge. “Acquiring new knowledge requires a connection between the child’s prior cultural knowledge and the new knowledge being taught and learned,” Sheets further claims (13).

Diversity Pedagogy Theory is a useful tool for analysing the results of the present study. Though Sheets focuses on cultural differences, this study focuses on specific forms of cultural activities, namely those that include using the English language in a recreational context. These specific cultural activities are predominantly related to youth culture such as using social media, the Internet, watching films, TV-series, and playing computer games. Therefore, the ideas that form DPT are highly significant for the heterogeneous classroom.

Results

How do the Participants Familiarise Themselves with the Students’ Knowledge of English when they Start Upper Secondary Level?

When asked what the most challenging with teaching English at upper secondary level today is, four of the five teachers referred to the students’ heterogeneous knowledge of English as the most challenging part of their work. Beatrice explains that what she finds most challenging is that “there is a heterogeneity of knowledge, where you have someone who is very weak and those who are very good, to make those who are very good not thinking that it is silly and lose interest, and make the weaker students feel small by having too difficult [lessons]”. Similarly, Emma also expresses a concern over the difficulty with teaching in a heterogeneous classroom as she admits that the most challenging part of teaching English today is “to reach every student.” She explains that “there is such a huge span between the students when they begin upper secondary level” and

there are many who are very, very good and there are those who have little experience, so it is a huge challenge to sort of provide everybody with an individualised learning and make it fit everybody and not

make it too easy for those who are very good and at the same time not make it too difficult, so that balance act is what I find most challenging. (Emma)

This balance act refers to the heterogeneity of the group where there are students at every level of the scale from A to E.³ However, there are more students who perform at A-level today, something that Alice and Beatrice also experience.

All the participating teachers familiarise themselves with the students' knowledge of English, however in various though somewhat similar ways. At the school where the participants work, they perform a diagnostic test in English very early in the first year of upper secondary school, where three areas are tested: vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. In addition to this test, the participants have their own ways of familiarising themselves with the students' knowledge of English. Beatrice, for example, asks the students to fill out a work sheet focussing on their experiences and attitudes concerning the four areas: speaking, reading, listening, and writing, which she later discusses with every student individually. Emma's students write her a letter in which they express their feelings and thoughts about the subject of English and what they need to work with in order to develop their knowledge of English. "With these tools [the diagnostic test and the letter] one sees pretty much who needs help and who needs to be challenged," Emma says. Dani and Cecilia ask their students to write something so that they can see their level of English, while Anne works with log books, specifically in larger groups where it is more difficult to have a personal contact with the students, and she also asks them to write a letter to her answering a few questions about what they see as their strengths and what they see as areas they need to work with in the subject of English.

Which Skills in English do the Participants see as Most Prominent among the Students?

In addition to confidence, the area where the students' skills in English are most noticeable is, according to Beatrice, oral proficiency: "Our students are confident, the most of them. They speak fluently." Their writing skills are not as developed as the oral, as she notices, "they like to write, even if it is

³ The grades used at upper secondary level education in Sweden range from A-F, where A is the highest. A-E is used for pass, and F is fail.

not grammatically correct and they use a lot of slang, such as, gonna, wanna, and expressions they see and hear.” Hence, oral proficiency is an area where the students are performing well, while written proficiency is an area where they perform less well.

Emma also notices that the students are good at expressing themselves orally in English, but the area in which they perform best is listening comprehension: “They are often very good at listening to English and they are often good at speaking and making themselves understood in the language.” Like Beatrice, Emma sees a difference between the students’ oral and written skills: “they do not have as much experience when it comes to writing, such as structure and those parts, the frames, and flow.” Again, it is in oral proficiency in combination with listening comprehension that most students have improved.

The fact that speaking skills are the students’ strength when it comes to learning English, is something that Anne also recognises: “above all, I would say that it is the oral proficiency that is very good nowadays as long as they dare to speak, and more and more students do that. Their pronunciation and vocabulary are good.” However, Anne notices that their improved courage affects their writing skills: “they sometimes have an overconfidence in that area.” The students’ relatively high performance in oral proficiency might have negative effects on their written proficiency as they may not see their own need for improvement.

Cecilia, who teaches at the international baccalaureate programme also identifies oral proficiency as the most prominent skill among the students: “many [students] are good at speaking, but they do not always have the writing skill on the same level, or they are good at using the informal language, that is, the everyday-language, slang.” Hence, she, just as Beatrice, Emma, and Anne clearly notices that the students’ written proficiency is not on par with their oral proficiency.

Dani explains that “there is a spread in every class” where you have “those who are very good and those who struggle with English.” There are “those who are good at expressing themselves, but might struggle with grammar and written communication,” she further states. In general, however, the students have a good level of understanding English. Dani sees the students’ listening comprehension of English as their primary skill.

All the participants explain that there is a difference in the students’ speaking and writing skills where they perform better orally. However, even though the oral proficiency is good, it is to a large extent informal. The

teachers notice that the students are confident – something that helps their oral proficiency, but restrains their written proficiency.

What are the Reasons for the Students' Heterogeneous Knowledge of English as Experienced by the Participants?

Increased exposure to English is one reason for the students' developed speaking skill, according to Anne: "the Internet and these things, that we are online, that we have contacts all over the world. I mean many [students] play games and learn English at a very young age when they sit and chat." On a similar note, Beatrice notices that the students' knowledge predominantly depends on an increased exposure to the English language: "they are exposed to English more and more and in various contexts such as games and computers, that is, things they like." The fact that they use English for activities they find interesting helps their learning process, Beatrice explains:

When they play these computer games and watch these movies, and chat with someone from another country, they notice that they understand a lot and have good pronunciation and the ability to make themselves understood, and may hear from those they play with that they speak well, I believe that they grow.

Confidence and oral proficiency thus might have a cross-fertilizing effect on each other, since not only does their speaking skill help their confidence, their confidence also helps the students with their speaking skill.

Dani also sees that one reason for the students' good level of understanding English is that "they participate in social media more and more. [...] They communicate with others using computer games or social media." Dani further speculates: "One would think that all students should have an increased knowledge in English due to this increase in exposure to the English language, but that is not the case." There are of course several reasons for this heterogeneity, one of which being that while there are students who spend several hours a day on activities where English is a regular means of communication, there are also students who spend very little time on such activities, hence creating an utterly diverse classroom (see for example, Sundqvist 2009; Cabau 2009; Sundqvist & Sylvén 2012).

The advanced listening comprehension and oral proficiency are connected to the students' extracurricular activities, Emma believes: "I believe that it has to do with the fact that they often watch new episodes of TV series.

They watch a whole season streamed from an American website and that is how they become good at listening to English.” Emma also sees a difference between those who have a talent for learning languages and those who struggle:

Sometimes I think that it depends on what talent a person has for learning languages. I see that those who are very good use the language naturally. They see and feel the language, while those who struggle do not have this ability. Instead, they have to learn everything and that causes heterogeneity among the students.

It is not only increased exposure that is the reason to the students’ competence in oral proficiency in the eyes of the teachers. In order for the student to develop this competence, he or she also needs to have a talent for learning languages Emma claims.

Cecilia also notices that some students have a talent for learning languages: “some [students] have an easier language acquisition,” which they have developed through their leisure activities: “There are those who read a lot and are interested in the *Game of Thrones*-series or play computer games and have contacts through the game.” Cecilia further explains: “Those who have a talent for learning languages have more opportunities today to hear the language and to use it outside of a school context [...] through access to the Internet and social media. They are exposed to English.” In Cecilia’s experience, it is the combination of increased exposure and a talent for learning languages that provides the students with a high level of oral proficiency.

In line with Emma and Cecilia’s experience of the impact of having a talent for learning languages, Anne recognises a difference between those students who have acquired a study technique and those who have not: “those who can study, who have a good study technique [...] can still acquire a lot of knowledge since they have structures or strategies for learning.” The students who acquire language competence in a less structured way, “those who struggle when they reach upper secondary level since they are not used to studying in that way, they have become better and they have become more in number.” The increased exposure to English thus benefits those who learn languages in a less structured and more intuitive way according to Anne.

Just as Beatrice, Emma, and Anne, Cecilia notices that the students perform well in oral proficiency, however, since she teaches at the international baccalaureate programme where all subjects are taught in English, she sees a difference between those students who have experienced the Swedish school

system and those who have studied elsewhere before upper secondary level: “I have the really good ones and then those who might not have studied here in Sweden, who might not have the same background [...]. Often, they have worked more with grammar. It is more important to write well than to speak well and there you have the opposite situation to Sweden.” This difference in competence is due to difference in educational systems and an effect of a multicultural and multilingual classroom rather than heterogeneity based on the discrepancy between those students who use English to a great extent in their leisure time and those students who do not.

The two teachers with longest experience, Anne (15 years) and Beatrice (14 years), clearly notice a change over time with regards to the students’ knowledge of English. Anne explains: “I think that they are better now generally speaking. They know more when they begin [upper secondary level]. They are more confident, I find.” Beatrice also comments on this change in the students’ knowledge of English: “I see that they are becoming better and better – I see it.” Since this change in the students’ competence in English is not valid for all students, it creates a heterogeneous classroom. How do teachers manage to provide the students who have an advanced knowledge of English as well as the students who have a limited knowledge of English with an individualised learning in this heterogeneous classroom?

Which Material, Methods, and Strategies, if any, do the Participants Apply in order to Support the Students’ Individualised Learning in a Heterogeneous Classroom?

All the teachers use different strategies to support the students’ individualised learning, though no one has a strategy of how to differentiate their education in a heterogeneous classroom. Grammar is an area where Anne makes sure that the learning situation, or rather the teaching material, is individualised by reading texts that the students have written and adjusting her teaching material to what most students need to work with. In addition, she adjusts the method with which the students work: “if someone really, really, struggles, instead of working with exercises, we might, for example, work with the text they have written, which I am super tough in marking and they re-write it.” She also explains that the students “know very much about learning strategies and which strategies they prefer and [she] thinks that [she] should listen to that as long as [she] keeps to the course requirement.” Adjusting the grammar exercises to the group’s level rather than covering

the course material from page to page is one way of adapting the material to the students' levels. However, it is through the actual work with the exercises, where she encourages the students to work at their own level, that an individualised learning takes place.

Dani uses feedback as a way to reach every student: "When they submit exercises and I give them back, I comment on various levels so that the feedback is individual and helps every student to develop." Dani further explains that she "does not adjust her teaching methods or material to the individual students." They receive the same assignment, which they perform at their level. Instead, "they receive individualised help and guidance." In this way, individual feedback, help, and guidance become strategies with which she provides every student with an individualised learning. Hence, Anne's and Dani's strategies to provide their students with an individualised learning are through an encouragement to study at their own level and through individual feedback respectively.

Beatrice gives every student the opportunity to study at his or her own level. While the students who are at level A have the opportunity to "hand in additional assignment that [she] can read," and are encouraged to read more books, the students who are at level E have a similar opportunity, since they are offered to hand in a short piece of text every week where she "highlights errors" so that the students "themselves have to figure out the grammatical errors, correct them, and resubmit the text." Hence, she strategy to provide her students with an individualised learning is predominantly through additional assignments.

Instead of a particular strategy or method with which to focus on an individualised learning, Emma "has clear dialogues with the students so that she can keep track of their progresses." The aim with these dialogues is to identify those students who need support and give it to them, as well as provide a challenge for those students who need it. Emma further explains that she has "a foundational material that she works with," but since the students work at different pace, she lets the students who work faster do other exercises, so that "those who need a bigger challenge receive it." In this way, she also adapts to the students' learning situations by using additional-assignments. Hence, Beatrice and Emma give their students an opportunity to study at his or her level through additional assignments.

Anne, Dani, Beatrice and Emma use strategies for an individualised learning that appear to be general (encouragement to work at one's level, feedback and additional assignments) and applicable to most subjects rather

than use material and methods that are particularly focused at working with the students' diverse knowledge of English.

Cecilia does not have a clear differentiation strategy. She explains that she uses the same teaching material and methods for all students, but that they "work in different ways during the classes and that the classes are taught in different ways using various material." It is thus the variety in teaching material and methods that is Cecilia's strategy to contribute to a dynamic educational process and in that way create as individualised learning as possible.

While several of the participants find the students' heterogeneous knowledge of English the most challenging part of teaching English at upper secondary level today, it is clear that they also struggle with finding strategies, material and methods with which to adjust the teaching processes so they are individually adjusted to every student.

Discussion

This article reports on a study conducted through interviews with five English teachers at upper secondary level that aimed to explore in what ways teachers work in a diverse classroom with particular focus on the students' heterogeneous knowledge of the English language and the difficulty of finding strategies to support the students' individualised learning. The results of the study show that the participants find the heterogeneity based on the students' varied knowledge of English the most challenging part of working as English teachers at upper secondary level today. When working in a heterogeneous classroom, it is important for teachers to acknowledge and to be familiar with the students' informal learning of English as pointed out by Sundqvist and Sylvén (2012). The results of the study show that the participants familiarise themselves with the students' knowledge of English primarily through diagnostic tests and various writing exercises. This familiarisation process shows that the students have a very good knowledge when it comes to listening comprehension and oral proficiency. The participants see that it is the students' extracurricular activities, for example, using social media, watching movies and TV-series, and playing computer games, that are the main reason for this heterogeneity. When teaching in a heterogeneous classroom, the participants apply different strategies, predominantly using additional assignments as means to support the students' individualised learning, though they admittedly struggle with differentiating the education

and find it difficult to challenge the high-achieving as well as the low-achieving students.

Discussing Diversity Pedagogy Theory, Sheets (2009) explains that effective teachers must not only understand, but also acknowledge, the role culture plays in the teaching-learning process. This idea is directly transferable to heterogeneity, where it is equally crucial for teachers to understand and acknowledge the role English outside of the classroom plays for the learning of English inside the classroom. In accordance with DPT, it is also important to recognise the role students play in their own learning processes (Sheets 2009). If students are either under- or over-challenged, their learning progress might be hindered. Hence, it is important for teachers to use methods, material, and strategies to individualise the teaching process – a balancing act that is experienced as difficult, as the results of the study show.

Since the social turn in second language acquisition, the field focuses on the contexts in which language learning takes place, and pays attention to multilingual and multicultural societies (Ortega 2011). The diverse classroom, that consists of multilingual and multicultural students and teachers, is predominantly an effect of migration (Carlsson 2009). However, phenomenon related to multilingual and multicultural societies are increasingly brought into classrooms via modern digital technology. Hence, heterogeneity based on the students' varied knowledge of the English language, which is one aspect of diversity, is an effect of technical developments including mass media and multimedia, as perceived by the participants. Today, Sweden, like many other countries around the globe, is a multimodal society (Erixon 2012), and is thus a highly diverse learning environment in which aspects of heterogeneity based on the students' varied knowledge of the English language need to be considered.

As seen in the results from the study, the participants with longest experience notice a change among the students in the subject of English, which is clear from Beatrice's statement: "I see that they are becoming better and better – I see it." However, the heterogeneity is not simply created because many of the students are better at English when they begin upper secondary level, but rather because this is not true for everybody. Hence, the teachers experience the span between the high-achieving and the low-achieving students as very big. It is particularly the students who learn languages in an intuitive way that have improved their knowledge of English, one participant claims. Several of the participants stress the students' extracurricular activities as the main reason behind their improvement in English. However, not

every teenager is a digital native, and not every teenager in Sweden who uses digital technology to a great extent does so in English. Yet, the classrooms are becoming more and more heterogeneous and the teachers find it harder and harder to meet the students' needs as is shown in the results of the study where a teacher talks about the difficult balance act that she needs to perform in order to cover the individual needs of all students. Another reason for the increased knowledge of English could be the view of English as a high-status language (Lindberg 2009). This is an on-going trend in several areas in the Swedish society, academia not to say the least, and it is reasonable to suspect that this trend is mirrored among the Swedish youth.

The results further show that the five participants all use different methods and strategies to support the students' individualised learning, though none of these is a strategy that is directly aimed at working with heterogeneity. This result further supports the participants' claim that heterogeneity is the most challenging part of working as an English teacher at upper secondary level in Sweden today. Clearly, the phenomenon of the heterogeneous classroom and how to work in it are problems that the teachers themselves struggle to find strategies for. Three of the participants do not differentiate their education and none of the teachers have strategies that address heterogeneity *per se*.

Diversity caused by multilingualism, multiculturalism, and in addition, individual differences such as reading and writing disorders etc. place high demands on teachers in all subjects. Heterogeneity due to the students' varied knowledge of English places high demands on teachers of English (Sundqvist and Olin-Scheller 2015). This diversity is the most challenging part of teaching English at upper secondary level today, as is shown in the results of the study where the participants talk about the "huge span" (Emma) between the students' knowledge, and the ensuing balance act that they need to perform in order to cover the needs of all students. The main part of this balance act is to find ways to challenge high-achievers as well as low-achievers without making the education neither too easy nor too difficult. Hence, teachers must be prepared to meet the students' diverse needs as Gonzalez et al. (2011) point out.

The heterogeneity discussed in this article is an effect of the increased knowledge of English among numerous students. An increased knowledge is indeed something positive, in line with Matizen's (1997) and Kinsella's (1996) views on the diverse classroom. However, this knowledge does not

cover all parts of the subject, as the participants explain. Instead, it is predominantly the speaking and listening skills that the students have improved together with a noticeable improvement in confidence. Furthermore, it is mostly the informal language proficiency that is increased. In comparison, the students' written proficiency and reading comprehension are not as developed, the participants experienced. This result can be compared to Swedish students' performance in the PISA-test (Skolverket 2013) as well as the report *The Culture of Reading* conducted on behalf of the government in 2012 (SOU 2012:65), though the test and the report focus on Swedish. The test and the report clearly show a decrease in reading habits among Swedish youth, particularly among young boys. Thus, the test and the report identifies an area where Swedish students' performance is low, information that the results of the present study, where the students reading and writing skills are far less improved than their speaking and listening skills, support.

The study discussed in this article only focuses on a small part of the heterogeneous classroom, and there are many areas connected to this study that need to be explored further. One such area would be to analyse the difference between the students' performance of, on the one hand, speaking and listening, and on the other hand, writing and reading. There might be fruitful ways of researching into how the students' increased skills in speaking and listening can be used to further their skills in writing and reading, particularly in connection with their leisure activities and use of multimodal texts in order to advance their knowledge even further. Another area that needs to be explored further is to find, test, and evaluate differentiation strategies that not only can be taught to teacher students, so that new English teachers are prepared to work in a heterogeneous classroom, but also can facilitate English teachers' situation today, so that the diverse classroom no longer is the biggest challenge of their work.

References

- Atkinson, Dwight (2011). Introduction: Cognitivism and Second Language Acquisition. In Dwight Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 1-23). London: Routledge.
- Asp, Kent (2011). *Svenskt tv-utbud 2010*. Stockholm: Myndigheten för radio och tv, report nr. 27
- Cabau, Béatrice (2009). The Irresistible Rise and Hegemony of a Linguistic Fortress: English Teaching in Sweden. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 3:2, 134-152.
- Carlson, Marie (2009). Flerspråkighet inom lärarutbildningen. Ett perspektiv som saknas. *Utbildning & Demokrati*, 18:2, 39-66.
- Denzin, Norman K. & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (2011). Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research. In Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1-20). London: Sage.
- Dreyer, Carisma & van der Walt, Johann L. (1996). Learning and Teaching Styles: Empowering Diverse Learners in Tertiary Classrooms. *Koers* 61:4, 469-482.
- Erixon, Per-Olof (2012). Skola och skrivundervisning i ett medieekologiskt perspektiv. In Ann-Catrine Edlund (Ed.), *Att läsa och skriva: Två vågor av vardagligt skrifbruk i Norden 1800-2000* (pp. 179-195). Umeå: Umeå universitet & Kungl. Skytteanska Samfundet.
- Estling Vannestål, Maria (2009). *Lära engelska på internet*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Galleta, Anne (2013). *Mastering the Semi-structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gonzalez, Roger J, Pagan, Maggie, Wendell, Laurie & Love, Carolyn (2011). *Supporting ELL/Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students for Academic Achievement*. New York: International Center for Leadership in Education.
- Gunnarsson, Britt-Louise (2004). Svenska, engelska eller Deutsch. Om språksituationen vid svenska universitet och högskolor. *Engelskan i Sverige. Språkval i utbildning, arbete och kulturliv* (pp. 108-129). Svenska språknämnden. Stockholm: Norstedts ordbok.
- Kinsella, Kate (1996). Designing Group Work that Supports and Enhances Diverse Classroom Work Styles. *TESOL Journal* 6:1, 24-30.

- Kling, Linda (2013). Skolan klarar inte att motivera eleverna. Interview with Johanna Giota. *Lärarnas tidning*. Accessed at www.lararnasnyheter.se
- Lindberg, Inger (2009). I det nya mångspråkiga Sverige. *Utbildning & Demokrati*, 18:2, 9-37.
- Liu, Dinlin & Nelson, Robert (2017). Diversity in the Classroom. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*, 1-6.
- Livingstone, Sonia (2002). *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment*. London: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Maitzen, Stephen (1997). Diversity in the Classroom. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 16, 293-302.
- Norton, Bonny & McKinney, Carolyn (2011). An Identity Approach to Second Language Acquisition. In Dwight Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 73-94). London: Routledge.
- Ortega, Lourdes (2011). SLA After the social Turn: Where Cognitivism and its Alternatives Stand. In Dwight Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 167-180). London: Routledge.
- Prensky, Marc (2001). Digital Narratives, Digital Immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6. (<http://www.marcprensky.com>).
- Sheets, Rosa Hernández (2009). What is Diversity Pedagogy? *Multicultural Education* 16:3. 11-17.
- Skolverket (2011). SKOLFS 2011:144. Förordning om läroplan för gymnasieskolan.
- Skolverket (2013). PISA 2012: 15-åringars kunskaper i matematik, läsförståelse och naturvetenskap.
- SOU 2009:600. *Language Act*. Accessed at www.regeringen.se
- SOU 2012:65. *Läsandets kultur. Slutbetänkande av litteraturutredningen [The Culture of Reading]*. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Sundén, Pontus (2011). Individualiserad eller individanpassad? Björklund blandar ihop begreppen. *Skola och samhälle*. Accessed at www.skolaochsamhalle.se
- Sundqvist, Pia (2009). Extramural English Matters: Out-of-school English and its Impact on Swedish Ninth Graders' Oral Proficiency and Vocabulary. (Doctoral Dissertation). Karlstad: Karlstad University Studies.
- Sundqvist, Pia & Olin-Scheller, Christina (2015). Engelska på fritiden och engelska i skolan – en omöjlig ekvation? *Educare* 2015:1, 53-71.

- Sundqvist, Pia & Sylvén Liss Kerstin (2012). Ämnesdidaktiska utmaningar i det heterogena engelskklassrummet – En jämförelse mellan elever med stor respektive liten mängd extramural engelska. In Niklas Gericke & Bengt Schüllerqvist (Eds.), *Ämnesdidaktisk komparation: Länder, ämnen, teorier, metoder, frågor och resultat* (pp. 121-135). Karlstad: Karlstad University Press.
- Svensson, Patrik (2008). *Språkutbildning i en digital värld: Informations-teknik, kommunikation och lärande*. Stockholm: Nordstedts akademiska förlag.
- Tatar, Moshe & Horenczyk, Gabriel (2003). Diversity-related Burnout among Teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 19:4, 397-408.
- The Government: Proposition (1999/2000:135). En förnyad lärarutbildning. Accessed at www.regeringen.se
- The Swedish Institute. Förändringar i svenska språket. Accessed at www.svenskaspraket.si.se/for-studerande/artiklar-om-sverige/artiklar-om-sprak/forandringar-i-svenska-spraket/
- The Swedish Media Council (2015). *Ungar och medier 2015. Fakta om barns och ungas användning och upplevelser av medier*. Stockholm: Statens medieråd.
- Tomlinson, Carol Ann (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. ASCD. Alexandria: Pearson.
- Vigmo, Sylvi (2010). *New Spaces for Language Learning. A Study of Student Interaction in Media Production in English*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.