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Assessment in English for Young Learners in Sweden: Guidelines, Challenges and Coping Strategies

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English is taught in Swedish schools from the primary level, often from year 1. However, grades are normally not awarded until year 6, and the official information as to what English instruction in the early years should focus on in terms of content and learning objectives is quite limited, as are the guidelines regarding assessment. Against this background, we have interviewed a number of Swedish primary school teachers about the curriculum and other official documents regulating English education in Sweden, as well as their teaching and assessment practices, including the challenges they perceive and the strategies

they employ to overcome them. Contact between the school and the students' homes has been an additional, though related, focus.

The participants confirmed that they experienced English instruction in primary school as not very well regulated, leaving them with some uncertainty as to how they should organize it and, in particular, how the students' performance should be assessed. The fact that English is ubiquitous in most young Swedes' lives was addressed as well. While the teachers did adopt different strategies to deal with the challenges they faced, they also expressed a need for enhanced guidance or cooperation.

Keywords: English for Young Learners, Sweden, assessment, curriculum, interviews

1. Introduction

As in most other European countries, the English language plays a particular role in Swedish society. It is commonly used in business, higher education and international communication, and it also has a strong position as one of the three subjects that have traditionally been considered 'core' subjects in the Swedish school system (see 3.2 below). It is generally held in high esteem among the population (Lundahl, 2009; 2014; Malmberg, 1993), to the extent that its frequent use in everyday life has caused some academics to consider it a threat to the Swedish language.

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These discussions have led to the passing of the Swedish Language Act of 2009, where it is stated for the first time that Swedish is the “official main language” of Swedish society (Bolton & Meierkord, 2013).

In international comparisons, Swedish students tend to do well when it comes to English proficiency. In a study reported in Bonnet (2004), focusing on English skills among “pupils at the end of compulsory education” (p. 7) in seven European countries, Swedes, along with Norwegians, achieved the highest scores. In the *First European Survey on Language Competences* (European Commission, 2012), which focused on “the foreign language proficiency of students in the last year of lower secondary education [...] or the second year of upper secondary education” (p. 4) in 16 education systems in 14 countries, Swedish students as a group were far ahead most of their European peers when it came to the first foreign language (i.e. English for most countries), even beating Malta (where English is an official language) in two out of three proficiency criteria.¹

¹ Much less impressively, and reflecting a serious problem in the Swedish education system, Swedish students ended up at the bottom when it comes to young Europeans’ proficiency in their respective *second* foreign language (European Commission, 2012, p. 95).

Good skills in languages, including languages other than one's first, tend to be partly a result of early, frequent and natural exposure, which young people in Sweden tend to get when it comes to English. However, formal language education at school is expected to play a role too, though it is generally more of a challenge to link its various aspects to outcomes in terms of proficiency. One of those aspects is assessment, including its aims, nature, content and frequency.

The present study focuses on assessment in the early years of English education in Sweden and on active teachers' views on the matter – teachers of young students who may soon be participating in comparative English proficiency tests of the kind referred to above. At the time of the data collection, the teachers' students were 7-12 years of age, attended grades 1-5, and represented the first group to have started their compulsory school education in Sweden after the adoption, in 2010, of the new Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) and the corresponding curriculum a year later (Skolverket, 2011/2018).

While a report taking up similar questions was relatively recently published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2015), it focuses only on teachers working in the school years 7-9 of compulsory education, thus leaving a gap regarding the earlier years and English for Young Learners (EYL).

2. Aim and RQs

The aim of this study is to enhance our knowledge of the challenges and coping strategies that are reflected in Swedish teachers' descriptions of how they work with assessment in English in the early years of compulsory education. For this purpose, we have carried out and analysed four group interviews with 15 active primary and lower-secondary school teachers in two Swedish municipalities.

In particular, the following research questions were asked:

1. What means (e.g. guidelines and tools) are at the teachers' disposal in connection with feedback and assessment?
2. What specific challenges do the teachers experience in these contexts and how do they cope with them?

3. The Swedish school context

Due to Sweden's well-developed infrastructure for information and communication technology (ICT), internet access and use in the country is among the highest in the world (Alexanderson & Davidsson, 2016). This, combined with the fact that almost all foreign films and TV series are subtitled rather than dubbed, opens up for plenty of opportunities for exposure to so-called "extramural English" (Sundqvist & Olin-Scheller,

2013), i.e. contact with the language outside of the English classroom. However, while the regular use of English in everyday life is thus quite common even among young learners, “shadow education” (Smyth, 2008, p. 465), i.e. private, additional tutoring or classes outside of school, remains the absolute exception (OECD, 2004; Southgate, 2009).

3.1. Education in Sweden

In principle, children in Sweden attend compulsory education from the year they turn seven (though the vast majority attend a preschool before that, usually from the age of one). All compulsory education is free of charge, and this includes books and other teaching materials, stationery, lunch and in some cases transportation. So-called independent (i.e. privately owned) schools also receive their funding from public sources, and all children are allowed to apply for a place there. These schools follow the same national laws and regulations as the public schools, but are independent from municipal administrations and their decisions. Compulsory education ends after nine years of primary and secondary school; however, over 98% of the students continue their studies and go on to two or three years of upper-secondary school (SCB [Statistics Sweden], 2017).

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As regards documents and regulations of the kinds that determine the content and nature of Swedish education, the taxonomy suggested by van den Akker, Fasoglio and Mulder (2010) may be applied. It distinguishes five levels of dignity and/or applicability: *supra*, *macro*, *meso*, *micro* and *nano*. The first of these, *supra*, concerns documents on the international level. In an educational context, it may comprise documents such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018) and the European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe, 2019). *Macro* refers to documents on the national, state and societal levels, which in the present context include the most recent Education Act (SFS, 2010:800) and curriculum (Skolverket, 2011/2018). Local teaching plans fit into the *meso* category, which comprises documents established on the local or institutional level. Plans concerning classes or groups of students correspond to the *micro* level, while students' individual development plans would be on the *nano* level.

The Education Act from 2010 and the curricula from 2011 that are derived from it (Skolverket, 2011/2018) are intended to ensure that all students receive equivalent schooling of good quality, irrespective of their geographic and socio-economic background and of what school, or type of school, they attend. All schools, both public and independent, are required to follow the curricula for their respective school forms. The first part of each curriculum describes the fundamental values that the school

system is based on, and what the tasks and goals of the schools are. The second part outlines the overall goals and guidelines of the educational level concerned. It specifies the norms, values, and knowledge that all pupils should have acquired by the time they have completed their schooling. It is also stated specifically that teaching in all school subjects should contribute to the students attaining these general goals. According to Wahlström (2014), the 2011 compulsory-school curriculum “has moved away from an earlier version of curriculum emphasising the professional freedom and pedagogical competence of teachers, towards a more prescriptive curriculum, where teachers are made accountable for the achieved knowledge results” (p. 731).

The adoption of the latest curricula was an outcome of and reaction to fundamental changes in Swedish education policies during the preceding decades, including the transfer of responsibility for and funding of schools from the national to the municipal level, as well as the establishment of the above-mentioned independent schools. The increasing segregation of schools that ensued, also in terms of student performance, seemed to call for a greater emphasis on equity as well as supervision by national agencies to balance some of the consequences of earlier reforms (see Wikström, 2012, as well as Wahlström, 2014, pp. 734f, for a summary of the developments).

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In fact, compulsory education in Sweden and the regulations pertaining to it continue to be reviewed in various respects, as attested by the fact that the 2011 curriculum now applies in a revised version (Skolverket, 2011/2018).

It can be added that at the same time as the Swedish school system was reformed with the latest Education Act, so was the teacher education, and the formal requirements for being allowed to work as a teacher became stricter. For example, teachers teaching up to year 6 now have to have a university teaching degree including English.

Another aspect of the Swedish education system is that its digitalization has come comparatively far. This includes widespread access to and actual use of information and communication technology, including laptops or tablets, internet access, as well as digital learning management platforms. While this development has not been problem-free, it is worth mentioning that digitalization can have an impact on teachers' assessment, documentation and grading practices, both positive and negative (Kroksmark, 2013; Timmis, Broadfoot, Sutherland & Oldfield, 2015). In fact, it has been suggested that computer-based assessment for learning (see 3.3 below) can contribute to more personalized educational practices (Shute & Rahimi, 2017, p. 15), and we already seem to see some signs of that.

3.2. English in Swedish education

English is a compulsory subject from year 3 of primary school, though the government recommends starting as early as in year 1. Depending on local school regulations, formal instruction in English may thus start in different school years and lessons may be scheduled with varying length and frequency. The latest Swedish curriculum guarantees, however, the minimum amount of English instruction that students should have received by the end of certain stages of their education: 60 hours of English, in total, for years 1-3; 220 hours, in total, for years 4-6; and 200 hours, in total, for years 7-9.

During the first five school years, the only existing macro-level guidelines for English teaching concern the general aim of the subject, in particular “[to help] the pupils to develop knowledge of the English language and of the areas and contexts where English is used” and “to develop all-round communicative skills” (Skolverket, 2011/2018, p. 34). When it comes to the productive aspects of the “core content” of the subject in years 1-3, only the following three terse formulations are offered: “simple presentations”, “simple descriptions and messages”, and “songs, rhymes and dramatisations” (Skolverket, 2011/2018, p. 35).

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It is not until year 6 that the knowledge requirements and grading criteria are listed and described in detail in the curriculum. This is particularly interesting in view of the fact that the other two subjects that have traditionally been considered ‘core’ subjects besides English, namely Swedish and mathematics, as well as some of the other subjects *not* normally being perceived as core subjects (biology, physics, history, geography and religion), all have knowledge requirements specified already for year 3. If this were the only criterion, English would thus have a status similar to that of physical education or crafts during the first half of compulsory school. In fact, as of 2012, actual grades are awarded from school year 6 for the various subjects, and the knowledge requirements and grading criteria for year 6 are currently the only concrete ones teachers may look to in all the preceding years of English education. This is despite the fact that assessing and measuring knowledge is a key element in a “standards-based curriculum” of the type that the Swedish 2011 curriculum is supposed to be (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015, p. 10). That said, the Swedish National Agency for Education has published, on a website dedicated to assessment (bp.skolverket.se), a couple of documents intended to support teachers in their assessment of students’ English skills in years 1-6

As is the case for almost all other subjects, there are standardized national tests in English in years 6 and 9. These tests are not used as formal entrance exams for the subsequent stages of education (though they may be taken very seriously by students, especially at the higher levels). The tests are, rather, supposed to be *indicators* of each student's achievements from a national perspective and, by extension, of the quality of teaching received. Ultimately, these tests represent one way of monitoring and promoting nationwide equality of education.

3.3. Assessment

In the present context, we understand the concepts of *assessment* and *evaluation* as they are traditionally used by European researchers, with the former referring to “judgements of students’ work, and [the latter] to judgements regarding courses or course delivery, or the process of making such judgements” (Taras, 2005, p. 467). Assessment, which we will focus on here, may also be defined as “the process of data analysis that teachers use to get evidence about their learners’ performance and progress in English” (Pinter, 2017, p. 141). Such data gathering and judgements cannot occur in a vacuum. They need to be justified against a specific set of goals that provide points of comparison (Scriven, 1967; Taras, 2005).

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Furthermore, despite the fact that Pinter's definition mentions only teachers as active parties when it comes to assessment, both process and outcome ought to be of interest to all stakeholders in education. The data gathered in small-scale assessments ensures the systematic follow-up of learners' abilities and provides feedback to teachers as well as evidence-based information to guardians. Large-scale assessments, on the other hand (for example in the form of standardized tests), will in many cases, and provided they are passed, not only function as an entrance ticket to the next educational level, but also be a source of unified information on large groups of students (Kunnan & Grabowski, 2014).

It is a common misconception that *assessment* and *test* are synonymous. While this may have been true historically, a glance at regulatory documents and contemporary literature on the subject indicates that a test is only one form of assessing knowledge, and as such just one of many facets of the phenomenon (Brown, 2007; Taras, 2005). In fact, developing and applying age-appropriate forms of assessment is particularly important when working with young learners, and Pinter (2017) points to a number of problems that can arise when attempting the application of traditional assessment methods on young learners. For example, the knowledge of English that non-native-speakers have in the early years of compulsory education often consists of rhymes and songs, as new languages are usually introduced in a rather playful manner. Exposing

learners to a traditional ‘testing’ situation that also involves reading and writing may be very stressful under such circumstances and may damage their self-esteem and their motivation for further language learning (Hansén & Forsman, 2017).

When working with young learners, it is recommended to use what Pinter (2017, p. 146) calls “child-friendly methods”, such as observation, self-assessment, portfolios or project work. The norm-referencing approaches – where teachers compare their learners’ achievement with some kind of norm, for example group average – are less suitable, according to her, as they foster unhealthy competition. There is also the risk that teachers fail to notice minor, individual progress. Criterion-referencing, by contrast, allows for greater individualization of assessment and feedback. Teachers compare the students’ achievement with their starting point and track the progress according to the criteria adopted, thereby discouraging comparisons between students and focusing on individual accomplishments (Pinter, 2017). Criterion-referencing, however, can only be conducted successfully when the teachers are equipped with clear and transparent assessment criteria (Alasuutari, Markström & Vallberg-Roth, 2014; Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2008).

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A discussion of assessment in contemporary education will have to involve the following two basic concepts: *summative assessment* is conducted *after* the completion of a task (Scriven, 1967; 1991; Taras, 2005), while *formative assessment* is conducted *during* the development process and “requires feedback which indicates the existence of a ‘gap’ between the actual level of the work being assessed and the required standard” (Taras, 2005, p. 468). One needs to keep in mind, however, that these two principles are not very clearly defined in terms of teacher practices (Leung, 2004) and are difficult to keep entirely apart. It has been claimed that assessment is never exclusively formative with no summative judgement having preceded it, even if the summative aspect remains implicit and the formative one is made explicit (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Then again, there are those who argue for “pure formative assessment” (which is the translated title of Lauvås & Jönsson, 2019); and while formative assessment can take many different forms, the authors are not alone in promoting portfolio-based assessment in particular. In fact (and of particular relevance in the context of the present study), portfolios have specifically been proposed for the assessment of early-years English-as-a-foreign-language writing (Barabouti, 2012) and speaking (Efthymiou, 2012).

Since the Swedish educational reform of 2010 (cf. above), the assessment criteria expressed in the national curricula have changed character. The focus has shifted from an input- to an output-oriented approach, which also means that the organization of teaching, including the subject content for a given class or school year, is now more readily determined by the teachers' own professional judgement (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010; Tveit, 2014). Both formative and summative assessment are provided for (even in the early years of compulsory education), and both forms do occur frequently in Swedish schools (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015, p. 19), yet there is now supposed to be an increased focus on key competences rather than specific content (p. 8). As indicated above, however, summative assessment in Swedish school does not include actual grading until year 6; instead, it takes the form of goal achievement descriptions performed twice a year with the help of a so-called individual development plan, or IDP (Pihlgren, 2013; Skolverket, 2012).

Recently, a specific approach to formative assessment called Assessment for Learning (AfL) has gained popularity in Sweden, as well as elsewhere. Teachers are encouraged to follow the principles of AfL, which is promoted as a good model for assessment. However, Lindström (2013) points out that merely providing teachers with some basic information on how to use it is not enough. In fact, an incorrect interpretation or misunderstanding of the pillars of AfL can entail some risks and unwanted

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consequences. Pettersson (2013), in her discussion of the complexity of assessment as a process, describes a number of instances where the inadequate application of AfL can result in the assessment not fulfilling its role. These include the following:

- students are not given opportunities to show their relevant skills and knowledge;
- students can present their skills and knowledge, but this is not interpreted and documented;
- students present their skills and knowledge, which is correctly interpreted but not documented.

In fact, a research overview by the Swedish Research Council on formative assessment in the new millennium (Vetenskapsrådet, 2015) concludes that supposedly formative assessment as observed in practice is often rather instrumental and ritualized and would benefit from collegial and professional development, as well as a more thorough theoretical foundation. Partly along the same lines, Jönsson & Thornberg (2014) explore the opportunities offered by (formative) co-assessment as a part of a continuous practice among colleagues, as a way to increase assessment competence.

As Hattie (2009) points out, what is being assessed, and how, influences the learning process itself. The optimal assessment procedure, according to him, includes both analysis and evaluation of students' performance, giving them a sufficient foundation to develop their skills and attain confidence in their individual learning process. Assessment lacking the analysis element can easily be perceived as a critique of students themselves and lead to reduced self-confidence and awareness of their learning process (Hansén & Forsman, 2017).

Finally, it should be pointed out that Swedish schools are expected to coordinate their work with the home (Skolverket, 2014). Much of the communication between the school and the students' guardians takes place via the digital platforms mentioned in 3.1. However, according to the current Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2011), schools also have the obligation to provide guardians with information about the students' performance in at least one student-parent-teacher meeting per term. In connection with at least one of these meetings, an individual development plan (IDP) is drawn up for each student. The role of the IDP is to document assessment and plan for the child's progress in all the subjects she or he is studying. In cases where students risk failure in any subject, a so-called individual action plan is to be set up, listing all the measures that are to be taken by the school in order to support the student, according to the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools

(Specialpedagogiska skolmyndigheten, 2015). Interestingly, despite the fact that the two types of plans have different roles in theory, in practice they often become two identical documents with different titles, according to Asp-Onsjö (2006).

4. Method

As the aim of this study was to analyse teachers' descriptions of the challenges they encounter in connection with assessment, as well as the coping strategies they used to overcome these challenges, we chose focus group interviews as our research method. Focus group interviews are characterized by flexibility and permit the collection of large amounts of data within a relatively short time and with limited resources (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Linhorst, 2002). As this study is of a qualitative character, quantitative principles for sampling and analysis do not apply (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). We aim at a broader understanding of the topic rather than generalizing it and are interested in finding out whether and, if yes, how a number of Swedish teachers managed to implement the assessment policy promoted via the new Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2011/2018) and what strategies they used to cope with any difficulties.

4.1. Interviews

We chose to rely on a four-page semi-structured interview guide for the interviews, which were carried out in Swedish so as to allow the participating teachers to express themselves as freely as possible. The guide – and thus the interviews – included an introductory part, where we addressed some ethical aspects (see 4.4 below), asked about limited amounts of biographical data regarding the participants (see 4.2 below), and clarified some of the terminology that would occur in the interviews. This was followed by the core of the interview: based on our research questions and with the help of an account of previous Swedish research on assessment (Forsberg & Lindberg, 2010), as well as regulatory and support documents, we created groups of questions to be used as discussion prompts in order to find out as much as possible about the subjects of interest to us while preventing the participants from going off topic (Vaughn et al., 1996). At the end of this part, we attempted to summarize the topics and views that had emerged during the interview, with an invitation to the participants to comment on or complement the summary. We concluded with a reminder of the ethical guidelines, an offer to answer any remaining questions the teachers might have, and an expression of thanks for their participation.

The interviews all took place in 2015 at the informants' schools (see below), and their average duration was approximately one hour. They were all video-recorded and later transcribed.

4.2. Participants

Interviewees were selected through convenience sampling. Being aware of the disadvantages of relying only on individuals that are interested in a given topic and willing to participate in a study about it, we tried to neutralize the impact of convenience by aiming for maximum variation (Patton, 2015), i.e. choosing teachers that worked in schools and social environments as different as possible.

The interviews were thus conducted with Swedish primary and lower-secondary school teachers of different ages and representing a wide span of professional experience, ranging from one year to more than two decades of teaching. Even though, in most cases, only the younger ones were *formally* qualified to teach English, they all taught English at different levels in years 1-6 at four schools in two municipalities in central Sweden: a public school in a mostly ethnic Swedish neighbourhood, a public school in a neighbourhood with large immigrant communities, a small public school in a village, and a popular independent (private) school in a suburb. The focus groups varied in size, ranging from 3 to 6 participants and adding up to 15 teachers in total.

4.3. Analysis

The transcripts were produced and analysed with the help of the qualitative-analysis software nVivo. The analysis was inspired by Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and conducted by following the guidelines for data management as recommended by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). We chose CGT as our method for data analysis as it seemed well suited to exploring the teachers' perceptions of official regulations and their adopted assessment strategies and practices. In the long run, the analysis of participants' experiences and reflections can result in theoretical assumptions that may lead to practical adjustments of the rules and regulations concerning assessment and feedback.

The process started with an in-depth reading of the transcripts in order to achieve immersion. Having obtained a sense of the whole, we proceeded to coding. Utterances that referred to any of the foci of the interviews were broken into meaning units, which in turn were annotated with brief and informative descriptions or codes. The latter were then compared and contrasted and put into meaningful clusters that formed categories, depending on how the codes are related and linked.

4.4. Quality criteria and ethics

In order to ensure the quality of the study, we decided to follow the quality criteria of (constructivist) qualitative research, as described by Guba (1981) and Rodwell (1998). *Trustworthiness* and *authenticity* are two major criteria developed for the purpose of assuring the value and acceptability of qualitative research. They help to address the criticism often directed at such research, namely of it being pseudo-scientific, and to discuss qualitative results with terms resembling those used in quantitative research. *Trustworthiness* can be compared to different aspects of validity and reliability, where the former relates to the “quality of the research product” and the latter to “quality in the inquiry process” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 59). By *trustworthiness* we understand accounting for “the truth value”, “applicability”, “consistency” and “neutrality” of the research (Guba, 1981, pp. 79ff), while *authenticity* is concerned with the research being beneficial for society, and with “its impact on members of the culture or community being researched” (James, 2008, p. 44).

We strived for *trustworthiness* in this project through transparent descriptions of our approach and research procedure. The *authenticity*, as described above, lies in the very aim of this project, as it was our wish to develop and deepen the knowledge about assessment practices together with, and for the benefit of, the teaching community.

Finally, we have taken into account the ethical guidelines laid down by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). In particular, we have tried to ensure the anonymity of the participants by not including any biographical details or names, not even of the workplaces or municipalities they represent. The interviews were carried out on a strictly voluntary basis, and the participants had been informed of the purpose and format of the data collection beforehand. It was possible to leave the interviews at will. The data was collected for the purposes of this study only, and we have no commercial interests related to the project.

5. Results and discussion

We have summarized our findings from the interviews in four sections below and chosen to discuss each group of results right after their presentation, at the end of each of those four sections.

5.1. Perceived dissonance between the status of the subject and the time devoted to it

One of the most striking results of our interviews is the fact that teachers reported there being “too little time” dedicated to English teaching in relation to the goals to be achieved.

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A way of coping with this perceived shortage of time and to provide students with sufficient input in the language early on was impromptu English teaching, which occurred relatively frequently and in various forms and situations, according to the informants:

[...] so we have a lot of this spontaneous stuff, that we say today's date, during some periods. And then it's in English only. And we have presentations before leaving for lunch, who may go and wash hands. So you describe that person [...] So it's about including some small, spontaneous thing every day.²

On the other hand, the teachers often emphasized the positive influence of extramural English (Sundqvist & Olin-Scheller, 2013; cf. section 3 above), which enhances interest in – and the motivation to learn – the language and equips many students with some pre-existing proficiency.

These results reflect the teachers' experience of a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the prioritized position of English in some regulatory documents and in modern society in general (Malmberg, 1993; Lundahl, 2009, 2014) and, on the other hand, the little time devoted to teaching the subject and the limited expectations regarding students' achievements in the first years of compulsory education (Skolverket, 2011/2018). The

² Quotes from the interviews have been translated into English by ourselves.

teachers were under pressure from guardians and society at large to educate good citizens and equip them with the skills necessary to function in the modern world, but at the same time they were not given sufficient support to fulfil those expectations, at least when it comes to quickly and systematically boosting the students' English skills in the early years of school.

Being aware that exposure to and interaction in a language are major factors contributing to its acquisition, the teachers sometimes tried to compensate in their own ways for the, in their opinion, too few hours officially dedicated to English teaching. While laudable, these efforts do not appear to constitute a sustainable solution for equal English education. What teachers seem to need is more time, both for English in the classroom and for in-service training, in the form of both courses and collegial cooperation on the *meso* level (cf. section 3.1 above).

5.2. Teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to interpret the guidelines for assessment

The participants in this study described the core content of the curriculum as being too vague and the knowledge requirements for year 6 as being "too far off" in time to provide sufficient support for assessment in the early years of English education:

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To be able to understand English at a “calm” pace and in a “simple” manner, or to be able to express oneself in a “simple” or “developed” or “well-developed” manner – what does that stand for?

[...] to me it's a little like what I BELIEVE they should be doing, or manage to do, or understand, through year 3. So it's very difficult to assess, I think. It's very clear if you have a year 5 or 6 class.

What we found is that for a perceived want of sufficient support from the National Agency for Education, teachers looked for guidelines and help elsewhere. The materials available could vary in both form and quality, but teaching materials including matrices or tests were among the most valued assessment aids. It is worth mentioning that these were usually published by independent publishers. However, while interpretations of regulatory documents, notably the curriculum, in the form of magazines or brochures were an appreciated type of aid, not everything that was in fact available at individual schools was actually made use of.

Local teaching plans were a recurring theme when it came to the interpretation of the general guidelines. Two of the participating schools had implemented a local teaching plan already, while in the other two schools such plans were being developed at the time of the interviews.

In all cases, local teaching plans were talked of as a necessary means to ensure progression and comparable teaching and assessment across classes and student groups.

When asked about their uncertainty concerning the interpretation of regulations and guidelines, the teachers, including qualified English teachers, often mentioned little, if any, training in assessment in English as a contributing factor. The interviewees described the existing in-service teacher training interventions as being exclusionary and aiming at either the teachers of older students (the ones that actually get grades) or some privileged individuals within their work team that were chosen for some reason.

The results thus suggest a certain degree of anxiety among the teachers, which may be symptomatic of a number of problems, one of them being, as pointed out by interviewees themselves, limited access to relevant in-service teacher training. Their experience of being excluded from professional development opportunities was often explained by them not having to grade students. Such an explanation ignores the fact that there are other ways of assessing students than grades – ways that, as stated by Pinter (2017), are crucial for building children's confidence, creating a "child-friendly" atmosphere in the foreign language classroom and avoiding the pigeon-holing of students. It would imply that summative

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assessment is somehow deemed superior to, or more important than, formative assessment, which goes against what is claimed by e.g. Black and Wiliam (1998). The recommendations by Vetenskapsrådet (2015) regarding continuous professional development and by Jönsson & Thornberg (2014) concerning the opportunities provided by recurring co-assessment thus still seem to be relevant. The fact that only specifically chosen individuals were able to participate in any kind of training in formative assessment suggests that in-service training of teachers in the early years of compulsory education is not a priority, at the same time placing the responsibility for spreading knowledge about new assessment and feedback practices into the hands of these individuals.

To complement the picture, it ought to be pointed out that few of the interviewees reported on any kind of assessment training regarding *English*: it was only the most recently examined teachers who had had this aspect included in their study programs. At the same time, the literature on assessment (see 3.3) emphasizes the importance of clear and transparent assessment criteria, the lack of which influences both what is done (or not) by the teachers, as well as the students' learning and self-assessment.

5.3. Assessment strategies

Summative assessment was rarely accounted for during the interviews. When mentioned, it was usually in the context of year 6, when the grading starts and standardized tests in English are introduced for the first time, or when discussing the individual development plan. The latter, however, is supposed to be a tool for both summative and formative assessment, as well as to function as a communication channel between the school and the guardians. Despite its multifaceted nature, it is generally used in practice only when students' performance is insufficient, or far beyond the requirements, or when explicitly requested by individual students or their guardians. In such cases, the teachers describe the state of the student's knowledge in relation to the knowledge requirements and list the steps to be taken to achieve the goals set down. It needs to be stressed that English as a subject is very rarely mentioned in these documents, and if so, it tends to be in response to a special request from the student and/or the guardians.

While few of the interviewed teachers used the terms *formative assessment/feedback* or *assessment for learning*, a lot of what they claimed to do in their every-day practice seemed to be just that. Despite the fact that, especially in the early years, documented formative assessment was rarely

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reported, informal, spontaneous formative feedback was commonly described. In their discussions of formative assessment and feedback strategies, the interviewees themselves reflected a current discourse, coming partly from above, that favours the formative strategies over summative ones:

I don't know, but assessment for learning is quite topical right now.

Their discussions were, however, marked by hesitation when using these terms for describing what and how they assess, which may partly stem from uncertainty concerning the concepts themselves. Teachers recognized them, but yet again they expressed the need for further in-service training with relevance to assessment practices.

The results also suggest some trends concerning the assessment of and feedback for young Swedish learners in English classes. To begin with, despite laws and regulations aiming at the opposite (SFS, 2010:800), actual English teaching practices vary considerably for different schools and students. A lot depends on the individual teachers' skills and interpretation of the guidelines, which may be seen as negative, considering that the official guidelines clearly state that equivalent education is one of the highest priorities of the Swedish school system. Different interpretations of what the content of English classes should be, and how and when the

students should be assessed, would thus seem to contradict that very core idea. However, there is another, equally important principle in Swedish education, namely the individualization of teaching in relation to students, the importance of which is also stressed by Pinter (2017).

The interviewees reported on various assessment and feedback techniques, but they expressed anxiety about their way of doing things possibly being “wrong”. This uncertainty may be a result of the present discourse on the *macro* level, where summative methods of assessment are treated as archaic and retrogressive, compared to the formative alternatives perceived as better. However, this discourse itself stands in contradistinction to what e.g. Sadler (1989), Leung (2004) and Taras (2005) claim, namely that both approaches must complement each other.

The interviewees often talked about their lack of knowledge or skills regarding assessment, possibly underestimating their own professional experience and understanding of their students’ needs. In fact, the variety of ways in which the teachers did assess and provide feedback in their attempts to help the students’ development, also on the individual level, seems to reflect a wealth of professional skills. It may thus be the case that what teachers actually need is not, as they often expressed, more detailed instructions or guidelines on what would correspond to the *supra* or *macro* levels, but enhanced opportunities for collegial cooperation and exchanges

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of experiences and ideas on the *micro* and *nano* levels (see also 5.2). The circumstance that the latter type of approach is an appreciated way of working became evident in the discussion of local teaching plans, which many of the interviewees talked fondly of or expressed a strong need for.

5.4. Contact with the home and usage of ICT

Another result, especially interesting in an international context, is the fact that in the early years of education, guardians were described as not overly concerned about their children's scholarly achievements, in particular in English. On the contrary, the focus of the regular student-parent-teacher dialogues was mostly on the child's socio-emotional development, followed by issues related to literacy (in Swedish). This suggests that while teachers struggle to identify the best possible ways to teach, assess and give feedback in the English subject, the guardians may actually not be particularly interested in their children's achievements in the subject in the early years, leaving such concerns until year 6, when both national tests and grades are introduced. By that time, students will already have been tutored in English for four to six years in school.

As to the ICT (information and communication technology) tools designed to support and enhance communication between the schools and the guardians, they were rarely reported to be used, partly because not all schools had access to them and partly because they failed to fulfil their

role. Some teachers mentioned a lack of time to familiarize themselves with the programs and their functions and might experience them as an unnecessary administrative burden, particularly when the guardians showed limited interest in using such information channels themselves. Presumably, this has changed to some extent since the interviews took place, in the sense that digital tools are now more than ever used by everyone in most contexts, including teachers when documenting and communicating about student progress.

In a broader, international context, there is thus a striking difference between the attitudes towards English in Sweden, as reported here, and those in some other European countries (OECD, 2004). Although the importance of knowing the language is generally acknowledged in Sweden, the guardians seemed to show little concern for the quality and quantity of English tuition in the early school years, according to our interviewees, and they apparently assumed that the children would learn the language well enough later. As pointed out above, shadow education (Smyth, 2008) in English is rarely considered desirable, let alone a necessity, for Swedish children (Southgate, 2009).

Although ICT was a recurring theme in the discussions about the students' extracurricular English activities and about such extramural English exposure (see section 3 above) being an integral part of many students'

lives, even in the early years, it seemed not to be as present in school-related contexts. Moreover, its integration in EYL classrooms seemed still far from common practice, despite the high degree of access to the internet and ICT tools in Swedish households as well as in schools (Alexanderson & Davidsson, 2016).

6. Conclusions and implications

With the help of this study, we hope to have shed some light on how teachers' work has been influenced by the changes that were introduced in the Swedish school system a few years ago, with a special focus on assessment in English. The interviews and their analysis represent a close-up of some EYL teachers' experiences and practices in a certain area in Sweden. It is meaningful, nevertheless, to raise some of the issues that emerged and that may resonate in a wider national and international context.

When it comes to challenges that the teachers experienced when attempting assessment and feedback in English, our study reveals a dissonance between what the status of the subject is in Swedish society and how it is reflected in the reality of the school world. Quantitatively limited and unclear assessment criteria as well as too little time devoted to teaching the subject were the two most recurring themes.

Another issue emerging from the results was the limited time devoted to in-service teacher training with relevance to assessment strategies, which was reflected in the teachers' uncertainty and lack of confidence in their own professional abilities.

The interviewees reported on spontaneous English teaching as a way of coping with the lack of time and stressed the importance of extramural English exposure and proficiency as a motivating factor for the students. When it comes to improving one's assessment and other teaching skills, collegial cooperation on the *micro* and *nano* levels constituted the most popular form of professional development, according to our informants. These results correspond to the outcome of a recent report by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2015), where similar issues are discussed in the context of how the recent school reform of 2010 influenced teaching and assessment in years 7-9 of compulsory education.

The outcome of this study ought to be of interest to teachers, teacher trainers, policy makers, researchers and parents. It also provides a springboard for further investigation, focusing on any or all perspectives on assessment, in particular, but not limited to, in EYL contexts, from the *supra* to the *nano* level. Comparisons of curricula and other regulatory documents, as well as of teaching and assessment practices, between Sweden and other countries (in particular those excelling in improvement

over time) suggest themselves. It would certainly also be of interest to complete the picture sketched in this report by conducting classroom observations in order to describe feedback and assessment as used in practice and to identify those types and strategies that the informants in the present study did not report, and may even have been unaware of.

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