



**Malmö högskola**  
Lärarytbildningen  
Kultur, språk, medier

**Examensarbete**  
10 poäng

# The Attitudes Towards the English Language in Relation to Achievements at a Multicultural school

*- An interview study of year nine students -*

Sandra Nissen  
Alexander Strukelj

Lärarexamen 180 poäng  
Moderna Språk Engelska  
2007-05-31

Examinator: Bo Lundahl

Handledare: Stefan Early



## **Prologue**

We would like to express our appreciation to the students and the teacher who took part in our investigation. We would also like to thank our supervisor Stefan Early and examiner Bo Lundahl, who provided us with advice, guidance and help during the investigation process.



## **Abstract**

This dissertation aims to study students at a multicultural school and their attitudes towards English, both as a school subject and as a language. Furthermore, the study investigates the relation between the students' achievements in the subject and their attitudes.

An interview study was performed with year nine students at a multicultural school. Thirteen interviews were conducted; twelve with students and one with the English teacher, which all concentrated on the relation between the students' background and their attitudes towards the English language and English as a school subject, as well as their achievements in the subject.

The results show that immigrant students do not manage to reach the aims and criterion posed in the syllabus for English to the same extent as native students. Even so, their attitude towards the language and the school subject is not affected. The study shows that immigrant students are as positive towards English as native students.

**Key words:** immigrant students, multicultural, achievement, attitude, the English language.



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# 1 Introduction

According to the report *Elever med utländsk bakgrund* (the Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2004), immigrant students are more likely to finish Compulsory School without having a pass in all school subjects. They are thus overrepresented in the group of students that are not qualified to apply for the national courses at upper secondary school. This phenomenon is apparently not unique for Sweden but is a recurring tendency in many of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. The reasons for the immigrant students' lower scholastic achievements are many. However, an important and often mentioned reason is the socioeconomic background. Other often stated reasons are parents' lacking knowledge of English, and families living in segregated areas, the children therefore going to schools with a high percentage of immigrant students.

Considering immigrant students' lower achievements in Swedish schools, is it possible that they are as positive towards English as some studies show? Or does the fact that they do not achieve as well as native students affect their attitudes towards the subject? Our research question is as follows:

- What is the relation between students' attitudes and their achievements regarding the English language at one particular multicultural school?

## 1.1 Aim

The aim of the dissertation is to perform an *interview study*, to investigate the achievements in English as well as the attitudes towards the English language and English as a school subject, among students at a particular multicultural school. In addition, the study intends to explore the relation between the students' attitudes and achievements. In other words, this dissertation does not set out to generalize the question of English achievements and the attitudes towards the language and school subject among immigrant students. Instead the purpose is to apply the generalized studies and concentrate the research on purely one school to gain a deeper

understanding of the students at that particular school. By investigating this question, we as teachers can become aware of the matter and furthermore learn how to deal with the attitudes, either positive or negative, that exist in one particular school setting.

## 1.2 Definitions

Some recurring and central expressions need to be clarified, such as *native students* and *immigrant students*, *attitudes*, and *the English language*, to make it easier for the reader to understand the meaning of the terms as they are used in this dissertation.

### 1.2.1 Native students and immigrant students

This description of *native students* and *immigrant students*, cited from the report *Reading Literacy and Students with a Foreign Background* (SNAE, 2005, p.5), defines the meaning of these concepts used in the dissertation.

*Native students*=Born in the test country with at least one parent born in the test country.

*Foreign born students with native parents*=Foreign born, but with both parents born in the test country (or with one parent born in the test country but the student speaks the “test language” at home).

*Foreign background students born in test country*=Born in the test country but with both parents foreign born.

*Foreign background students born abroad*=Foreign born and with both parents foreign born (or one parent foreign born and the language spoken at home is not the test language).

For the ease of the reader, our definition “immigrant student” encompasses the last definition. We also use “second generation immigrant student”, which contains the two groups “Foreign born students with native parents” and “Foreign background students born in test country”.

### 1.2.2 The English language

When referring to *the English Language* in this study, the concept covers the language as it is used in the classroom – by the teacher, the students and in the methodology – all varieties of

English on TV, on the radio, in films etc. and all kinds of written English. Naturally it also includes English as a mother tongue in Britain, the US, Australia and other English speaking countries.

### 1.2.3 Attitude

*Attitude* is a very complex concept to define. However, in his work *Psychological Types* (1921, 1971) the Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, Carl Jung, defines it as a “readiness of the psyche to act or react in a certain way” (as quoted in Wikipedia, *Attitude (Psychology)*, 2007). From the Word Net search the following definition is taken: “a complex mental state involving beliefs and feelings and values and dispositions to act in certain ways”, which is the meaning used here. A simplified explanation is given in *Longman’s dictionary of contemporary English* (2003). Here attitudes are the opinions and feelings that one usually has about something or someone. They can be positive or negative.

## 2 Background

English is the mother tongue or official language of a large number of countries, covering many different cultures, and is the dominant language of communication throughout the world. (...) The subject aims to developing an all-round communicative ability and the language skills necessary for international contacts, and an increasingly internationalised labour market (...). The subject has, in addition, the aim of broadening perspectives on an expanding English-speaking world with its multiplicity or varying cultures.

This is an excerpt from the Swedish syllabus for English in year 9. It states the importance of the English language, and not only defines it as vital knowledge, but also connects it with the understanding of different cultures and international relations. Naturally, the course description is written with the Swedish school system and native Swedish students in mind. However, the amount of students with diverse cultural background is large and growing, and there are schools where the number of multicultural students exceeds that of native.

According to the report *Engelska i åtta europeiska länder – en undersökning av ungdomars kunskaper och uppfattningar* (SNAE, 2004), Swedish students are very positive towards English, both as a language and as a school subject. The study, performed by the school authorities in eight different countries, apart from Sweden, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Germany, showed that Swedish students are the most positive and have the highest percentage of all of the eight countries taking part in the study. On the other hand, the students in the other countries were also positive towards English. However, the average was lower than the average of the Swedish students. Concerning the importance of knowing English, the countries were more in accordance. According to the study, students in Sweden with an immigrant background normally achieve lower grades than native students.

However, in a report by the Swedish National Agency for Education performed in 2003 only addressing the attitudes towards nine different school subjects, and focusing not only on secondary school but also upper secondary school, the results are the opposite. Here, it is the children with immigrant backgrounds that have the highest percentage of positive answers,

73% liked the subject English, and 36% of the students liked it very much. The native students had a percentage of 65, with only 24% answering that they like the subject very much. Concerning the importance of achieving good knowledge in the subject – an issue more relevant to our dissertation – the students were tied on the positive side of the answers, 81% each. Investigating the two alternatives nonetheless shows the immigrant children more positive as 31%, as opposed to the native students' 27%, answered that it is absolutely essential knowledge, and 50% answered "very important". One percent of the native students answered "not that important", but among the immigrants, the percentage was zero.

In a press release on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2003, the Swedish National Agency for Education addressed the issues of immigrant children receiving lower grades in the text *Sämre resultat för elever med utländsk bakgrund beror inte bara på skolsituationen*. The report argues that the situation and prerequisites for integrating immigrants is different in many countries, and more difficult and complex in the Scandinavian countries than others, according to the in-depth analysis *Läsförståelse hos elever med utländsk bakgrund* made by the same authority. The press release affirms the gap between students of foreign background and those of native Swedish background, but argues that there are factors that at least in part affect the results: e.g. lower socioeconomic status in the family, less educated parents and a higher level of unemployment as well as a higher percentage of boys, who statistically receive lower grades than girls.

In addition, the report declares that immigrant families speak a different language than Swedish at home and states that 82% of immigrant students who were born abroad speak a different language, and only 47% of the students who were born in Sweden. Speaking the language of the country, according to The Swedish National Agency for Education, is an indicator of integration more than a pure language effect. However, research (Lightbown & Spada, 2002; Richards, 2000) in the areas of language learning has proven the requirement of a strong and well-developed native language in order to learn foreign languages. For a child to become truly bilingual, great effort is required. The danger is that the child becomes torn between two languages, not feeling truly comfortable with either, not giving the child the crucial base for further language learning.

Dahlin, Andersson & Langmann (2005, pp. 26-28) claim that all Swedish students, regardless of their background, believe that English is the most interesting and important subject in school out of the three core subjects, English, Swedish and Mathematics. In their survey, 48% answered positively on the question "I am interested in English" and 80% believed it is most important to have knowledge of English. In addition, the students in the

study also seem to believe that their parents consider English more important than Swedish and Mathematics. Furthermore, the same study shows that students in the Swedish communal schools feel that having a good knowledge of English is important for the future. 58% felt that they will need knowledge of English in future studies and 42% believed their knowledge of English will definitely be useful for their future employment, and they want to have more English in school.

The study *Elever med utländsk bakgrund* from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2004) also shows that while the immigrant students do not achieve as well as the native students, they do have the same motivation for learning and the same support and commitment from the parents as the native students. The positive attitude towards school and education seemed not to differ between native students and immigrant students. However, an interesting and crucial point in the report is that immigrant students, to a much lesser extent than other students, value English as being “one of the three most useful school subjects”. In other words, English as a school subject is not as important to them as to native students and students from a second generation immigrant background.

Of all the native students, 76% left Compulsory School with at least a passing grade in all three core subjects in the year of 1998. The percentage for second generation immigrant students or immigrant students who began their school attendance in Sweden was 66%, while only 48% of immigrant students who began attending the Swedish school system after year one, managed to reach at least a pass in the core subjects. In other words, 91% of native students reach a qualification to continue their studies at upper secondary school, 85% of the second generation immigrant students or students that have only attended Swedish schools qualify for upper secondary school, and the group with the smallest percentage of qualified students for upper secondary school is the group of immigrant students who did not start school in Sweden, with only 64% (SNAE, 2004).

As mentioned previously, one important reason why immigrant students do not achieve the same results as native students in the Swedish school, is their socioeconomic background. The socioeconomic background refers to the level of education of the parents, the parents' connection to the labour market and if the students live with one or both parents. Students from educated backgrounds tend to perform better than students from homes where parents have less education. And in general, parents of immigrant students have a lower level of education than the parents of native students (SNAE, 2004). Furthermore, parents of immigrant students are excluded from the labour market to a much greater extent than native parents. With this in mind, the Swedish National Agency for Education suggests that

differences in the socioeconomic background, rather than immigrant background itself, explain underachievement in school. The report also points out the fact that students who live with both their parents generally achieve higher results in school than students who live with only one of their parents, a situation more common for immigrants than native students.

Hence, immigrant students are at a disadvantage compared to native students because of several factors. They often live with only one parent, the parent or parents are not highly educated and have a weaker connection to the labour market, which in turn give the parents lower incomes, and they receive social welfare to a greater extent than native parents. According to *Elever med utländsk bakgrund*, the socioeconomic background is worse for immigrant students who immigrated after the start of the Swedish Compulsory School, which gives us an understanding of why these students seem to struggle the most and do not achieve as high results as other students in the Swedish school.

The amount of time immigrant students have been in the country also affects the achievement to a certain extent. *Elever med utländsk bakgrund* states that the amount of time the student has learnt the Swedish language and adapted to the Swedish school system is an essential factor to consider. Many of the teachers who were interviewed for the report give deficient knowledge of the language as the main reason for the immigrant students' lower results. Furthermore, many cities in Sweden are in many ways segregated which in turn leads to segregation in schools, since the students go to school close to their home. In the report, the Swedish National Agency for Education warns that an increasing segregation in schools, on the basis of ethnic and socioeconomic factors, will affect the equivalence of the Swedish school system.

## 3 Method

We base our dissertation on thirteen interviews, twelve with students and one with one of the English teachers in a year nine class at a multicultural school. In the sampling process we were helped by the teacher: we interviewed three high achieving students, three weak students, and six in the middle.

Hatch (2002) writes that interviews uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds. He quotes Spradley; “By word and by action, (...) [researchers] say, ‘I want to understand the world from your point of view. (...) I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you would explain them’ ” (2002, p. 91). This explains what we are aiming for in our dissertation.

We conducted formal interviews, defined by Hatch as having a consistent and planned structure with good possibilities to digress as well as delving into the answers given by the informants (2002, p.94). In addition to the questions we formulated, we prepared possible routes into more focused details, when given certain answers. Hatch mentions that formal interviews are used when interviewing is the only form of collecting data, as in our case. We refrained from using any other methods of investigation in favour of conducting a large number of interviews. Most notably – and contrary to the recommendations of Hatch, for example – is the omission of observation as a research tool. We came to the decision of using solely interviews because during the very limited time available to us, observation would give us very little in the way of measurable and usable data, and in order to use questionnaires one would need a bigger pool of informants.

### 3.1 Informants and school

The school that was the subject of our interview study is an F-9 school (a school with students from Pre School to year nine) with approximately 300 students in years 6 to 9. Year nine encompasses 76 students, and only one is a native Swedish student. In other words, the percentage of immigrant students is extremely high, and the English teacher we interviewed



estimated the school to have approximately 98% of immigrant students. Among the teachers, roughly half of them are natives, and half have an immigrant background. The students all live in the same area as the school, where most buildings are blocks of flats. The neighbourhood is part of a region with a very high percentage of immigrants. Very few students choose to study French and German and instead of having the common modern languages to choose from, such as Spanish, the students are given the opportunity to choose small languages such as Bosnian, Albanian and Arabic. Therefore, the students are given the chance to study their mother tongue during regular school hours, instead of afternoons and evenings as is most often the case in Swedish schools.

Even though the school divides the students into different groups, the teachers do not regard the system as having several classes. In other words, all students in year nine are considered to be one big class and are then formed into smaller groups, according to level as well as other factors. Therefore all subsequent references to a class in this dissertation will be of all year nine students in the school. The reason the school has this system, is that they work thematically and constantly divide the students up into new groups depending on the topic. In year nine the students have at least 110 minutes of English per week; however, the students can choose to have more through “språkval”, where students substitute the studies of a second foreign language in favour of English. Additionally, students who have adequate writing and reading skills but do not reach a passing grade because of poor speaking ability, have an extra 70-minute session each week where they practise their conversation skills. When it comes to their knowledge of English, the level differs substantially and extreme differences are visible according to the teacher. Some students are already doing parts of English A from upper secondary school, while others can hardly say “my name is”. The national tests in English done in the class a few months earlier, showed approximately 40% of the students not reaching the criteria for pass, with the others receiving either a pass or a pass with distinction. In other words, no student received the highest grade.

All of our informants except two were born in Sweden. These came to Sweden when they were two and eight months old respectively. All informants have two parents born in countries other than Sweden. The families of most of the informants came to Sweden around 20 years ago, with some having been here for as long as 30 years and some only 16. In the home, the vast majority of the informants speaks the mother tongue and very rarely uses Swedish. For one informant, Swedish is banned from his home.

The interviewed teacher is one of the English teachers in this year nine class. She has worked at the school for four years and teaches English in the high achieving group

containing 18 students and in the low achieving group where they practise conversation extensively. Before working at this school she was a teacher at a school with only high achieving students and extremely few immigrant students.

### 3.2 Pilot interviews

As a preparation for the dissertation, a series of pilot interviews addressing student attitudes towards the English language, both in the classroom and in their everyday lives, was conducted in a predominately native Swedish upper secondary school. The interviews were performed in Swedish, to establish an informal setting and taking into consideration the informants' level of English. The total amount of informants was twelve, five from the first year of upper secondary school, and seven from the second year. By necessity, these were convenience samples as the interviews were conducted in a practise school during the practise period, and its purpose was to raise questions and indicate future difficulties by doing actual interviews. Appendix A contains the core interview questions. During the interviews however, – which were all quite brief – probing questions were asked in order to delve deeper into the answers, when opportunity was presented. As the informants were encouraged to answer as extensively as they could, the results for most of the questions cannot be presented in diagrams. The ones allowing for graph representation are shown in appendix B.

In the interviews, a clear pattern of general approval and liking for English was seen. In essence, the pilot interviews sparked ideas for research questions regarding this very issue, and if the level of knowledge of English influences the attitude towards the subject.

### 3.3 Procedure

The teacher divided the twelve students who were to take part in the interviews into two groups, and assigned individual times to them. Both of us interviewed six students individually, and we conducted the interview with the teacher together. With the permission of the students and the teacher, we recorded the interviews to make sure that we would not miss out on any important and crucial information. During the interview we only took notes if we felt that we had to make a note of something the student did, or his or her body language,

that could not be recorded. Before we started the interviews we assured the informants that their names and the name of the school would not be mentioned in the study, and that they were free to stop the interview at any stage. All interviews were conducted in Swedish as we wanted the students to feel comfortable and relaxed when answering.

We estimated the interviews with the students to take approximately twenty minutes. They were however shorter than this, and on average lasted ten to fifteen minutes each. Some students enjoyed talking about their visions and beliefs regarding the English language and English as a school subject, while others were extremely difficult to get satisfying answers from. They only answered the given questions and did not add any thoughts of their own, and we therefore had to ask additional questions without trying to be leading in order to collect relevant data. This was a setback, as we had not planned for the students to simply answer the questions as briefly as possible but had hoped for more of a discussion concerning the topic.

During the pilot interviews, the students had all seemed eager to start discussing the topic at hand and give answers with greater depth, but this was not what was needed at that stage. We had prepared interview questions for the students, which can be found in appendix C, and most originated from the pilot interview questions. Since we did not succeed in having as extensive conversations during the interviews as we had hoped for, we asked almost the same questions to all students as we had to follow our prepared questions.

We conducted all interviews with the students on the same day, and the one with the teacher the following day. By interviewing the teacher after the students, we were able to review the data collected from the students and formulate some of the interview questions based on their answers. The interview with the teacher lasted thirty minutes and during that time she also gave an in-depth picture of the school and the class.

### 3.4 Trustworthiness

When doing an interview study, one needs to be aware of the fact that the research often is made on a limited area of interest, and the results gathered are related to that area and not easily applicable to others, not even areas similar in structure and demography. Several strategically chosen interview studies can be used for generalisation, but from an isolated one no general conclusions can be drawn.

When only one type of investigation method is used, formal interviews are chosen according to Hatch (2002). This provides a reliable and relevant source of information, with adaptability to the specific task and the possibility to focus on details within the answers given. In our case, the formal interview was structured by several prepared questions, but probing questions were used to extract even more significant facts, and was therefore a good source of relevant information.

The possibility of generalisation when using interviews is good, but good and relevant sampling in such cases is extremely important. As we are conducting an interview study, this does not apply to us. Instead, our sampling gave us a varied selection of informants within our chosen area, which will allow us to generalise within the chosen demarcated group. As we are interested in generalising within a group of 76 individuals and our group of informants consists of more than 15% of the whole group, our data can be considered reliable.

## 4 Results

In this chapter the results from the interviews with the students and the teacher are presented. As we did not ask the same questions to the students as to the teacher, the results were compiled separately. The results from the student interviews are followed by the teacher interview.

### 4.1 Results from the student interviews

The informants all believe that going to school is important, and like going to school. They all feel accepted and have many friends they socialize with. When thinking about studying, all but one like it. This informant actually “hates” school and blames English for this.

Almost everyone thought that the current amount of English is enough, although three would not object to having more. One wanted more because of a failing grade at the time of the interview and the need to improve it.

When asked about the enjoyment of English in school, everyone liked the subject although one felt it would be even more enjoyable if his/her skill was higher. When compared with the other subjects in school, two thought it was equally enjoyable as other subjects, and two said it was among the worst. The remaining eight all ranked it among the top three. When this group was asked to order the three core subjects, three ranked English higher than both Mathematics and Swedish and two could not make a distinction between the three. The last three informants thought Swedish and English were equally enjoyable, and two informants ranked the enjoyment of Mathematics lower than the two other subjects while one ranked it higher.

When the students were asked how much English they learn in school, all of the students answered that they were taught a great amount. When speaking about homework, six said that they do it well, and because they like it. Five do it well, but sometimes because they like it, and sometimes because they need to. The last informant only does it because he/she needs to, and never finds any enjoyment in it. In addition, ten informants use the same amount of time compared to other school subjects. Of the two informants who does them for a longer period

of time, one gave the reason of not getting help with English from home and one said that English is important in the future, a statement given by another student as well.

We asked which languages the informants thought they speak more or less fluently. All except three said English – the other language or languages being Swedish for everyone and their mother tongue for all but one who only said Swedish. The latter student stated Swedish as the first language learnt – mainly by watching Swedish television – and therefore feels more secure using Swedish than his mother tongue, which he does not often speak even though his parents only use the mother tongue. Evidently, most feel that their English is sufficient to handle every situation. Noteworthy is that two of the informants expressing near fluency in English said they are fairly good when asked about their skill in English. Overall, however, the stated skill level is high, four saying their level is fairly good, and the rest saying their level is high.

When asked about English ability in the home, two stated that no one in their immediate family knows English. One has an uncle that speaks English, and one has English-speaking brothers and sisters. The remaining eight informants have English-speaking fathers as well as brothers and sisters and in one case the mother as well. We then asked them if they felt that they enjoyed English more because it was easy for them, and five of the informants saw a clear connection between proficiency and enjoyment. Four saw some connection, and three did not think so at all.

The question concerning contact with English during the students' spare time gave many answers. The most recurring answer was film with nine answers. Music was also popular with a total of eight informants answering this. Six answered TV, and the same amount mentioned either computers or the internet. Four students communicated with their family in English, and four read texts in English, meaning either books or magazines. Only one student said that he/she hardly comes in contact with English outside of school.

We asked what type of use the students thought they would get from knowing English, and the answers were unsurprisingly few. Two informants stated travelling as well as working in Sweden as the future use, and a further four answered only travelling. Future work was mentioned by three informants. Two thought about their university studies, and only one answered that he/she would have no use for English whatsoever. Eight thought about the future benefit while studying the subject in school, and felt more motivation as a result. One rarely thought about the use, but when considering it, it provided motivation. The remaining three never thought about any future use of English.

We posed the question about the importance of English, asking them to compare it to other school subjects. Nine ranked it either as the most important subject in school or in the top three. The reason given was that it is an international language and therefore very important to know. Two informants were of the opinion that all school subjects were equally important, and one said that English was a subject of medium importance. The following question was whether or not the students got more motivated when studying and learning English if they understood the use and purpose of the subject, and seven informants clearly stated that they had a higher motivation when studying English because of this. Three did not get a higher level of motivation, and two were undecided in the matter.

The final question was regarding whether or not they would choose English if it was an optional subject. Nine said yes without hesitation. The reason given was the dominance of the language in the world, and that it gives the ability to communicate with large parts of the world's population. One would choose it, but only because it is as prominent as it is; if it was not as strong as world language, the informant would not. One informant would choose it in absence of languages that were "more fun", and the last one would choose it if his friends also did so.

## 4.2 Results from the teacher interview

Since our main aim with the interview of the teacher was to get an in-depth picture of the class and the school, as well as to compare the students' answer to the teacher's opinion of the students and some of their own answers, we chose to interview only one teacher. Hence, the result of the interview with the teacher is purely descriptive and based on her answers only.

The answer to our first question, whether her opinion is that immigrant students at this school do not achieve as well as native students in the Swedish school, was positive. She has the advantage of having the experience of working with both native students and immigrant students and by comparing with her former school she can absolutely see a difference in achievement. She explained that she sometimes realises that she lowers the requirements and expectations for the students, as the general level is lower. She said that she tries very hard not to do this but sometimes does, to give the students a chance to go forward and keep the students motivated.

According to the teacher, the only reason for differences in achievement between immigrant students and native students is undoubtedly the unsatisfactory mastery of the Swedish language. She explains that the immigrant students in this class more or less only speak their mother tongue at home and with their friends in school. She also says that since the students lack good knowledge of Swedish, even if most of the students were born in Sweden, as simple a part of the lesson as learning a new word from the word list can take much more time than planned, because of students not understanding the Swedish word. Hence, a large part of the lesson is lost while she has to explain the Swedish word; otherwise the learning will not be meaningful. In her opinion, this is the reason students so easily fall behind in the Swedish school system, something that will later affect them in every stage of their lives.

Regarding the question if she believes that the students in this class speak fluent English, she did not fully agree with the students and their view of themselves. She did say nevertheless, that the students of the high achieving group would be able to manage in many situations, however, not in all.

When it comes to students' attitudes towards the English language and English as a school subject, she believes that the students enjoy the language and the subject and understand the importance of learning English. According to her, the students are positive and want to develop their knowledge. However, she says that the positive attitude is not as high as at a school with a high percentage of native students. She also claims that the English language does not have the same high status among the students in this class as in classes with many native students.

Regarding the future benefit of knowing English, they talk about it a lot in the class, to motivate the students. Still she believes that the students do not fully see the benefit and the importance of knowing English for the future but are only focused on today. However, she is certain that the students who are focused on upper secondary school and want to continue their studies at university, might see the future benefit fairly clearly, which is also her reason for believing that the high achievers and the average students would choose English if it was an optional subject. She is sure that the weak students, on the other hand, would give it up any day.

As for the question if she believes that the students overrate their own knowledge, she felt that they do overvalue their knowledge of English. According to her, the students have an extremely bad self-knowledge and some are too self-confident, while others do not have any self-confidence at all. Compared to her former school, she says that the students in this class



do not know where they stand grade-wise. Many students find it difficult to understand why they do not achieve a passing grade. She believes that the reason for the differences between this class and a class at a school with many native students is another mentality among the people and the parents at this school. The parents encourage their children a lot and believe that their children perform well even if that is not always the case. In other words, she has noticed that the parents are not always realistic in their behaviour towards the children.

Regarding the students' view of education and knowledge, the teacher thinks that some of the students in this class understand the importance and the benefit of having an education. Those students are very focused, but only on the subjects they need good grades in to get into upper secondary school, e.g. if a student is interested in the science program at upper secondary school he or she puts a lot of energy on subjects such as Mathematics and all science subjects. Others are not focused at all, she says, since they know that within one or two years they will be married or work in their parents' shop, and therefore do not need the education to the same extent and all people coming to the shop speak the same language.

Concerning whether the students get support and help from their parents, she says that some students get a lot of help and support. However, she says that it is often very difficult for the parents to help their children, often they do not speak very good Swedish and therefore do not understand the texts. Furthermore, many parents know even less English and as a result the students' opportunities to get help from their parents are limited. Nevertheless, she states that working parents who want to be integrated and part of society pass their ambition on to their children. They buy dictionaries and work hard with their child, which agrees with the image of high achieving students coming from well-educated homes.

When talking about the students' plans for the future, the great difference between 'stronger' students and 'weaker' students is that 'stronger' students can already see the future benefit of good knowledge of the English language, according to the teacher. However, she feels that in general, the students do not think about the future benefit at the moment, but only to reach upper secondary and to get a grade in English.

Concerning exposure to English in the spare time, she believes that most of the students mostly watch TV channels and listen a lot to music from their own country. She does not think that the students in this class come into contact with English to the same extent as native students. This, she believes, affects their level of English. Her experience tells her that if the students watch many programs or films in English or listen to English music, they get an increasing interest in the language and they want to develop their knowledge and learn new words from the lyrics etc.

## 5 Analysis and discussion

Ten of our informants were born in Sweden, and two moved here before they were one year old. Considering they have spent their entire lives in Sweden, one would expect their language ability to be native-like. This was not the case, as all spoke with a foreign accent, they all made grammatical errors with varying frequency save two, and their vocabulary was in most cases less than perfect. The thickness of their accent varied. Only one of the twelve informants had an accent that would be considered slight although still notably foreign. According to the teacher, the lack of fluency in Swedish transfers into a higher difficulty in learning English, as the need to explain certain Swedish words and phrases takes a great deal of the lesson. The teachers interviewed for the report *Elever med utländsk bakgrund* made by the Swedish National Agency for Education (2004) all give the same reason for why immigrant students do not achieve as well as native students in the Swedish school.

The problem that has arisen with students not being able to learn Swedish in a satisfactory way, in order to integrate properly into the Swedish society, is a very serious one that needs to be addressed. A way of circumventing this issue would be to develop good teaching material purely in English. This way, the English teachers would be able to focus on teaching only the English language during their classes and thus make use of the time assigned to English much more efficiently. The fact that teaching materials reflecting this new situation do not exist in multicultural schools is illogical, a fact that is mentioned in the report *Elever med utländsk bakgrund* (SNAE, 2004). Not surprisingly, the interviewed teacher said that translation exercises do not work at all in her multicultural class. Are teachers at fault for the lack of English fluency in immigrant students? Have the Swedish school clung to old methods that worked in the past, and not adapted to the new situation in society today? It seems that a mixed classroom needs new methods, as the Swedish ability of the students is not always sufficient when using traditional methods such as word lists and translation. In the report from the national tests for year nine during the spring term of 2006, *Ämnesprovet 2006 i engelska i grund-skolans åk 9 och specialskolans åk 10* (SNAE, 2006, p.14), this exact issue is discussed. It states that if the English teaching and the syllabus for English are formed with only native Swedish students in mind, this may in turn create great disadvantages for immigrant students.

Research shows (Lightbown & Spada, 2002; Richards, 2000) that native fluency in the mother tongue is needed in order to learn foreign languages in a satisfactory way. None of the informants spoke Swedish with native fluency and our results indicate the same regarding their mother tongue. Many informants expressed that they sometimes need to use Swedish words when speaking their mother tongue, because of an insufficient vocabulary. And none of the informants speak Swedish in their homes. As for which languages the students thought they speak more or less fluently, two of the informants did not state their mother tongue in their answers. One said Swedish and English, and we could hear that the statement was true when applied to Swedish in the sense that he would manage in practically every situation he would face, but it was not native usage as he made glaring grammatical errors, spoke with a thick accent as well as using quite basic vocabulary. This is especially surprising since the informant learnt Swedish before his mother tongue. The other one only gave Swedish as his/her answer, but was one of the most fluent and while having a pronounced accent, the informant hardly made any grammatical errors. Another informant that also had a near native fluency with hardly any errors, although with a thick accent, said that Swedish was not allowed in the home. One could claim this deviates from the norm, but it could also be a form of rebellion from his part. Because the parents do not allow Swedish to be spoken in the home, the student finds the forbidden language intriguing and therefore learns it defiantly, with a high level of enthusiasm.

Almost all informants said they were fluent in English, and good at the language, even the low achievers. But some gave contradictory answers, also saying they were just OK in English in response to other questions. This shows a lack of insight in their language ability, and an overvaluing of their knowledge. This was confirmed by the teacher, who says that the students have bad self-knowledge and overrate their abilities. This could be due to the parents not giving a realistic image to the child or it might be the school not explaining the aims and criteria to the students sufficiently. The teacher also contradicts the informants' image of their contact with English. She said that music and television seem to originate predominantly from the home countries of the parents, whereas the students gave answers estimating a very high contact with English. According to the teacher, the considerable amount of input one expects a native Swede to receive, from television and music for example, therefore cannot be taken for granted with immigrant students. A plausible explanation for the difference in opinion is that the teacher was able to contrast the amount of English input among the immigrant students to the amount a native student receives on average. Accordingly, this applies to Swedish as well, which one could argue is a much more serious problem. While not the

primary focus for this dissertation, it is still an issue that needs to be addressed. We have seen it affecting English studies and one can imagine that it affects every other school subject as well. The lack of a native level of Swedish will also suppress the students during their entire lives, and the subsequent lack of a satisfactory level of English will greatly reduce their chance of higher education as well as international work opportunities.

It is a fact that most students go to school close to their homes. If they live in a segregated community, they will therefore all go to the same school. This creates differences in opportunities already from when the children start school, as they lose their one good chance to come in contact with native students and use the Swedish language. They are taken even further from integration in Sweden when being put in schools with percentages of native students falling well below 5%. Even in the few cases where immigrant children attend day-care, they will use centres close to home, where the problem with a very high percentage of immigrants is naturally present. Many reports from the Swedish National Agency for Education, for instance *Sämre resultat för elever med utländsk bakgrund beror inte bara på skolsituationen* (2003), discuss socioeconomic background affecting student performance. It might be the low education of the parents, the high level of unemployment, and a general low standard of living that impair their achievements in school. A lesser interest in learning Swedish may result from this unequal situation.

The status of English seems lower than in schools with fewer immigrant students, according to the teacher. The reason might be that in schools with predominantly native students, English is the first foreign language the students come in contact with, and will therefore be the important language to learn. For immigrant children however, many languages share this focus: Swedish, the mother tongue, maybe even the language of their friends attracts some attention. Accordingly, the relevance of English as a language is not immediate, as they might spend vacations in the home country of their parents where they are able to communicate without hindrance and the importance of English is obscured.

Most informants ranked English as one of the top three subjects. One of the high-achieving informants ranked it of medium importance, while two of the low-achieving informants said it was the most important subject in school, and the remaining low-achieving student ranked it among the top three subjects. One of the low-achieving informants, who ranked English as the most important school subject, hated school and actually claimed English was a big part of the cause of this, while the other one liked it immensely. This shows that the correlation between importance and enjoyment is not as clear as we thought when

beginning the dissertation. It indicates that the value of English is understood by students, and that performance is not correlated to effort.

The attitudes towards English are therefore not relative to the achieved results. Students are aware of the importance of English, but are not able to perform according to their wishes. We can see the level of considered importance of the subject of English drop slightly as student achievement goes up. We believe that this is because students consider their language skill to be sufficient enough, and might even take their ability slightly for granted. In our pilot study, conducted in a school with almost no immigrant students, indications of an approximately equal level of importance can be seen. In the study, seven of a total of twelve informants placed English among the top three subjects. In addition, Dahlin, Andersson & Langman (2005) state that Swedish students rank English as one of the most important as well as interesting subjects.

Concerning future benefits from the language, the high achievers all see several while the low achieving students do not, which is confirmed by both our results and the teacher's answers. The reason might be that the high achievers want to use the language for work, studies and travel, and have thus already thought about the benefits extensively, while low achieving students have not considered them yet. This might contradict earlier findings but instead our hypothesis is that while low achieving students understand the importance of English, they have not found concrete uses for it yet, whereas high achieving students have already figured out the use of the language. Another possible explanation is that when the students reflected on the future usefulness of the language they might have discovered less applicability than they previously thought.

Some of the students want to continue their studies in upper secondary school and at university, but the teacher explained that others already know that their future work will be in the family shop or that they will have a husband, thus not needing a profession or higher education. Accordingly, they cannot see the future use of English. How can we as teachers motivate these learners, not seeing the motivation of studying and learning something which in their opinion they may seldom use? One needs to be conscious of this issue, and strive to meet the students' varying situations and address them with the awareness that everybody has their own reasons for studying or not.

The results of the students in the class compared to the national average are weak. The national tests gave 40% of the students a failing grade, and none of the students received the highest grade. In a class of 76 students, this is a very noteworthy figure. In the report from the Swedish National Agency for Education regarding the national tests during the spring term

2006, *Ämnesprovet 2006 i grundskolans åk 9 och specialskolans åk 10*, 15.4% of the Swedish students and 13.3% of the immigrant students received a pass with excellence. Swedish students failing to reach the aims are 3.9%, while the figure for the immigrant students was 8.4%. Regarding grades, eighteen students were currently in the group with high achieving students that have grades above a pass. At the time of the interview, three students fulfilled the criterion for a pass with excellence, and would receive this grade according to the teacher. The teacher however explained that a total of six students would probably receive the highest grade at the end of the semester. If this figure stands, it would translate into less than 8%, a figure that is remarkably low. The report *Elever med utländsk bakgrund* (SNAE, 2004) addresses the difficulties of immigrant students in reaching upper secondary school, and confirms that immigrant students generally receive lower grades when compared to native Swedish students.

The teacher talked about sometimes unconsciously lowering her grading standards for the students because of the overall lack of knowledge and language ability in the class, which may create an untenable scholastic future for the students. If they are given grades higher than the grading criteria dictate – most notably passing students that should not receive a passing grade – it creates a situation where they not only might overvalue their knowledge and ability, but also get this confirmed by their teacher. Students are thus able to start upper secondary school with insufficient knowledge of English, instead of beginning with a year in the individual program in order to improve their skills and start in a regular program only after they are ready. In upper secondary school, the teachers expect a certain level of English. When the students do not possess this, the English lessons become difficult for them to follow and understand, and subsequently they have difficulties developing their English skills any further in school.

## 6 Conclusion

A connection between achievement and student background is evident when looking at our results. At the beginning of this dissertation the statement seemed strange to us, but nevertheless we were proven wrong. The lack of skills in Swedish is the most important reason for this phenomenon. In this particular class, the students interviewed do not speak any Swedish at home or with their friends, which is a disadvantage to them. Since they do not have sufficient knowledge of Swedish, the English lessons cause problems for these students as all the teaching materials and the methodology are based on learning by way of Swedish. Therefore it is essential to have teaching materials solely in English to form a learning environment equal to all in Swedish schools, where all students are given the same opportunity to develop their English abilities.

Nonetheless, achievement is not equal to attitude, as low achievers considered English to be very important compared to the other school subjects, and high achievers considered it of medium importance in some cases. There can be many reasons for this, but one might be overvaluing their skill, and another might be thinking that the school does not provide enough stimuli or a base for further language development as their skill well exceeds the average. In general however, the students in the class enjoy English and most of them appear to believe that English is the most important or among the top three most important school subjects. Their reason for positioning English this high is that they believe that it is essential to know. Furthermore, they express that we live in a world where everyone speaks English, and they too feel the need to be able to communicate with other people.

Another conclusion to be drawn from this dissertation is that the students interviewed in this class seem to come in contact with English to a lesser extent. The information gathered from the students did not show this, but the interview with the teacher seemed to paint a different picture, as she contrasted the amount of English input that the students were getting on average to the amount that many native students would receive.

We can see that the problem about poor achievement is not to be found in students' attitudes towards English. Their attitudes are largely positive in comparison to their achievement rates. Explanations must therefore be found in other factors. One thing is sure: students with an immigrant background are not helped if their learning of English has to go by way of Swedish.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### **Interview questions in the pilot interviews:**

Hur mycket engelska har du per vecka?

Vill du ha mer eller mindre engelska, eller är det bra som det är?

Hur gillar du att ha engelska?

Ser du fram emot det mer än andra ämnen i skolan?

Tycker du att du lär dig mycket på engelsklektionerna?

Läser du engelskläxor väl? Bättre än andra ämnen?

Vad får du ut av engelska språket?

Tycker du att engelska är viktigt att lära sig? Om ja: viktigare än andra ämnen i skolan?

#### **Rough translation of the interview questions:**

How much English do you have each week?

Would you want more or less English, or is what you have now good?

How do you like having English?

Do you look forward to it more than other subjects in school?

Do you think you learn a lot at English class?

Do you read your English homework well? Better than other subjects?

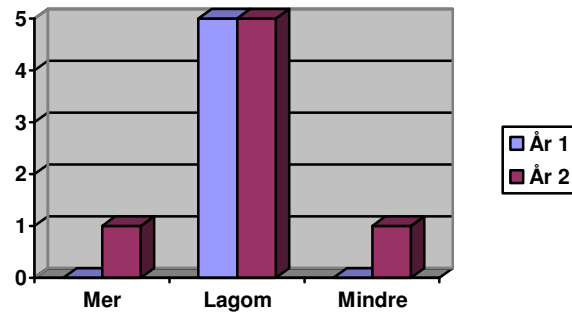
What do you gain from the English language?

Do you think that English is important to learn? If yes: more important than other subjects?

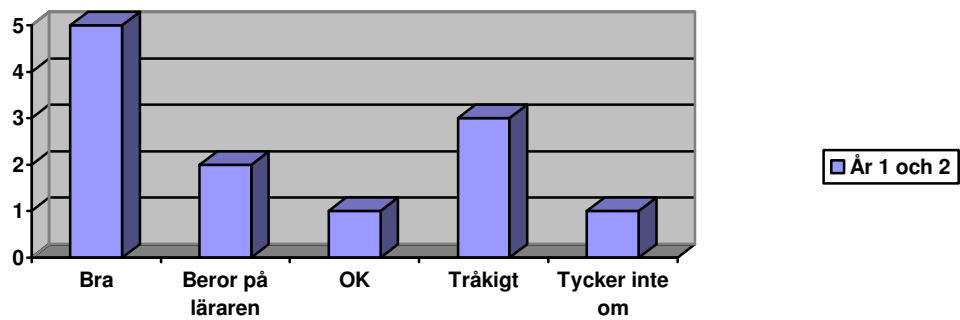
## Appendix B

### Selected results from the pilot interview:

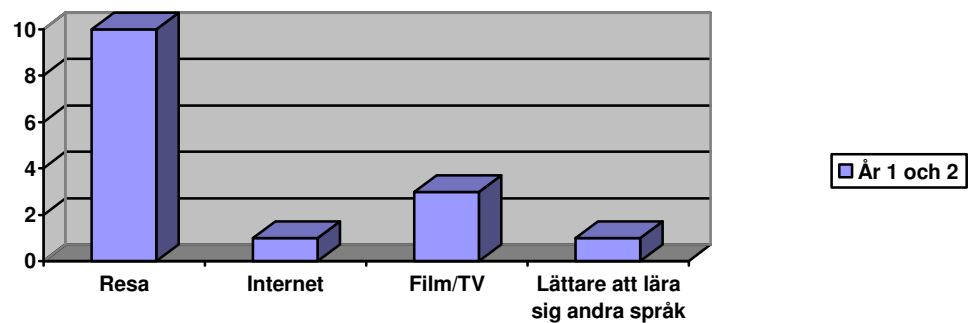
Vill du ha mer eller mindre engelska, eller är det bra som det är?



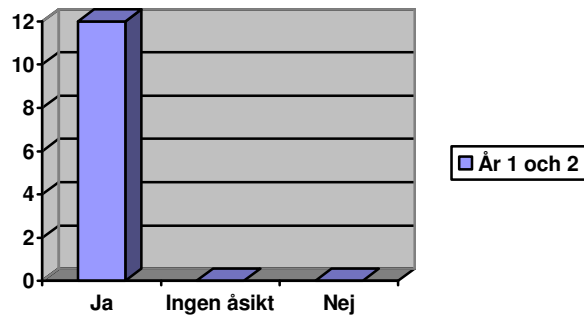
Hur gillar du att ha engelska?



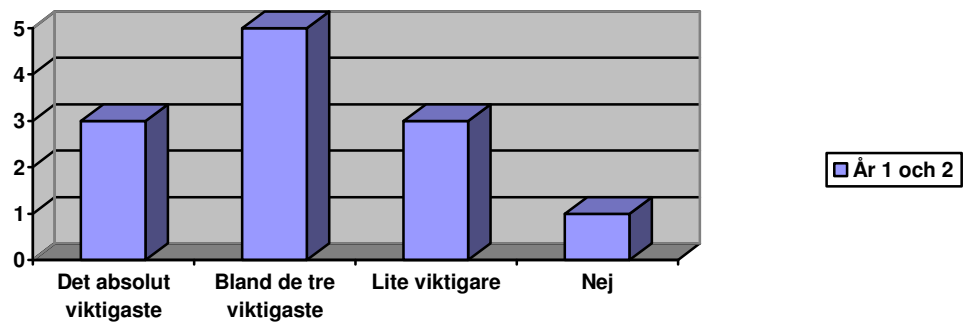
Vad får du ut av engelska språket? – När har du nytta av engelska?



Tycker du att engelska är viktigt att lära sig?



Viktigare än andra ämnen i skolan?



**Rough translation of the interview questions:**

Would you want more or less English, or is what you have now good?

How do you like having English?

What do you gain from the English language? – *When do you benefit from English?*

Do you think that English is important to learn?

More important than other subjects?

## Appendix C

### **Interview questions in proper interviews with the students:**

#### Background questions:

Berätta lite om dig själv – varifrån dina föräldrar kommer, hur länge du har varit i Sverige, när du började skolan i Sverige och så vidare.

Beskriv vad du tycker om skolan.

#### Proper questions:

När började du ha engelska i skolan? Hur mycket engelska läste du då?

Vill du ha mer eller mindre engelska nu, eller är det bra som det är?

Hur gillar du att ha engelska i skolan?

Ser du fram emot det mer än andra ämnen?

Tycker du att du lär dig mycket på engelsklektionerna?

Läser du engelskläxor väl? Bättre än andra ämnen?

*Gör du dina engelskläxor med glädje eller av tvång, eller för att du vet att det är bra att kunna engelska?*

Vilka språk anser du att du kan tala mer eller mindre flytande?

Hur bra tycker du att du är på engelska?

Finns det någon i din familj som talar engelska mycket bra?

Känns det som om du tycker mer/mindre om engelska för att du har lätt/svårt för det?

Beskriv hur du kommer i kontakt med engelska på din fritid? Alltså, när du har nytta av engelska i ditt liv?

*Hur många timmar per vecka chattar du på Internet på engelska?*

*Hur många timmar per vecka ser på engelskspråkiga program på tv?*

Hur tror du att du kommer använda det engelska språket i framtiden?

Tänker du någonting på den framtida nyttan när du läser engelska i skolan?

*Tror du att du kommer att skaffa dig ett yrke där det är nödvändigt att kunna engelska bra.*

Hur viktigt tycker du att engelska är att lära sig? Jämfört med andra skolämnen?

Känns det som om det hjälper studierna att känna till nyttan av engelska i verkliga livet?

*Går det enklare att läsa engelska än till exempel historia, eftersom nyttan är mer påtaglig?*

Om engelska var ett frivilligt ämne skulle du då välja det?

### **Rough translation of the interview questions:**

#### Background questions:

Tell a little about yourself – where your parents are from, how long you have been in Sweden, when you started school in Sweden.

Describe how you like school.

#### Proper questions:

When did you start having English in school? How much English did you have then?

Do you want more or less English now, or is what you have good?

How do you like having English in school?

Do you look forward to it more than other subjects?

Do you think you learn a lot during English class?

Do you read your English homework well? Better than other subjects?

*Do you do your English homework gladly, because you have to or because you know it is good to know English?*

What languages do you think you can speak more or less fluently?

How good are you with English?

Is there anyone in your family that speaks English very well?

Does it feel like you like English more/less because it is easy for you / you have difficulties with it?

Describe how you come in contact with English in your spare time? In other words, when do you benefit from English in your everyday life?

*How many hours per week do you chat on the internet in English?*

*How many hours per week do you watch English shows?*

How do you think you will use the English language in the future?

Do you think about the future benefit when you have English in school?

*Do you think you will have a job requiring good English?*

How important is it to learn English? Compared with other school subjects?

Does it feel like it helps the studies knowing the use of English in the real world?

*Does it feel easier to study English than for example history, since the use is more evident?*

If English was an optional subject, would you choose it?

## Appendix D

### **Interview questions to the teacher:**

Beskriv skolan och klassen.

Vårt examensarbete bygger på rapporter om att elever med invandrarbakgrund generellt presterar lägre än svenska elever i den svenska skolan. Hur är din bild av det, instämmer du? Vad tror du är den största anledningen till att det är så?

På frågan om vilka språk eleverna anser att de kan tala flytande nämnde nästan alla elever engelska förutom svenska och deras modersmål. Anser du att de pratar flytande engelska och att de kan klara sig i alla situationer?

Hur upplever du elevernas attityd till engelska språket och till engelska som skolämne?

Pratar ni om den framtida nyttan av engelska i klassen och isåfall hur går du till väga?

Vi frågade eleverna om de skulle välja att ha engelska eller avstå från ämnet om engelska var ett frivilligt ämne. Vad tror du att de svarade och varför?

Övervärderar eleverna sina engelskkunskaper, och varför tror du att de gör det i så fall?

Hur är elevers syn på kunskap och utbildning?

Elevernas syn på just engelska?

Vilken kontakt har eleverna med engelska i hemmet?

Vad är elevernas framtidsplaner med språket engelska?



**Rough translation of the questions posed to the teacher:**

Describe the school and the class.

Our dissertation is founded on reports that students with an immigrant background generally are less able in the Swedish school than native Swedes. What is your view on this? Do you agree with the statements?

On the question on what languages the students feel they can speak more or less fluently, almost all of the students mentioned English as well as Swedish and the native tongue of their parents. Do you think they speak fluent English and can handle themselves in any situation?

What do you think of the students' attitude to the English language and English as a school subject?

Do you talk about the future use of English in the class and in that case, how?

We asked the students whether or not they would choose the subject of English or not if it was a voluntary subject. What do you think they answered and why?

Do the students over-value their knowledge of English, and in that case, why do you think they do?

How are the students' view on knowledge and education, do you think?  
And the students' opinion on English in particular?

What contact do they have with English in their home?

What are the students' plans for the future with English, in your opinion?