

# If You Get Double the Time: Teaching practices in the “Swedish/English” language subject option in Swedish nine-year compulsory schooling

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*In Swedish nine-year compulsory schooling, all students are supposed to learn English and at least one additional language, i.e., French, Spanish, or German. As a final option, extra Swedish and/or English classes, often called SvEn, are offered for students who choose not to study another language. The activities in SvEn are unregulated: there are no official instructions for the teachers, no set teaching goals (over and above those for regular Swedish and English classes), and no grading criteria, as students choosing SvEn are not graded in this language choice. This paper focuses on how 17 teachers organize their teaching of English in SvEn, basing the study on teacher interviews. It also analyses the assumptions regarding language learning that underlie their teaching practice and how these are connected to current and previous course syllabi. The analysis of the interviews demonstrates that many teachers have well-thought-out strategies for English teaching, though they are not always successful in realizing these in classroom practice. Despite the fact that the interviewed teachers say that underachieving students need more class time to succeed in their studies, many of them simultaneously describe the difficulty of filling SvEn classroom time with relevant content. None of the interviewees refers to current curricula and course syllabi. The teachers' statements about lesson activities, and their reasons for them, fall into four categories corresponding well to the subject view that formed part of English course syllabi from the 1960s up to 1994.*

*Keywords:* classroom activities, teaching practices, course syllabi English, Swedish/English language subject choice

## 1 Introduction

Many teachers wish to have more classroom time, principally to spend with underachieving pupils, but what do teachers actually do when they get double the time to spend on their subject? In Swedish nine-year compulsory schooling, the possibility of extra classroom time presents itself in Swedish and English language studies. Students who do not study other modern languages can receive additional Swedish and English instruction in an option often known as

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“SvEn”. SvEn activities are relatively unregulated: there are no instructions for the teachers, no set goals for the teaching, and no grading criteria, as SvEn students are not graded. The activity does not even have an official name; instead, each school must find a suitable name for it.

Though one could easily be critical of SvEn’s lack of direction and focus, it is also possible to view the option – in this case, from the perspective of its English component – as offering many students substantial reinforcement in their studies. Per week, students have more SvEn lessons than regular lessons in English. This gives teachers a great opportunity to work on lessons, together with their pupils, that are relevant to and efficient for the group, without being bound by regulations or other rules. How do teachers use the extra time this option gives them?

This article discusses how a group of teachers organized their English teaching in the SvEn option based on these teachers’ statements. It also analyses the different language learning assumptions that underlie teaching practice and how these are connected to current and previous course syllabi.

## **2 English in nine-year compulsory schooling**

English language has been a compulsory subject since nine-year compulsory schooling was introduced in Sweden in 1962. During the preparatory work leading up to this introduction, it was far from clear that foreign language studies would be included (Marklund 1983). The first curriculum for nine-year compulsory schooling represented a compromise in which English was compulsory from grades 4 to 7 but was an elective subject in grades 8 and 9. In practice, almost all students chose to study English in grades 8 and 9 as well. In the next curriculum, introduced in 1969, English became compulsory, and the classroom time established for the subject at the time has not changed in principle since then. When students today complete their nine-year compulsory schooling, they have received at least 480 hours of teaching in English. The curriculum reform of 1994 gave English, together with Swedish and mathematics, exceptional status in the nine-year compulsory schooling. To continue on to a national program in upper secondary school, students were required to have a minimum grade of “pass” in these subjects.

There were six course syllabi for English language studies since nine-year compulsory schooling was introduced. In 1962, 1969, 1980, and 1994, new course syllabi were introduced in connection with Sweden adopting new curricula for nine-year compulsory schooling. In 2000, the course syllabi were revised, which meant small changes for most subjects; for English and other languages, however, the course syllabi were entirely reformulated, which is why these are considered entirely new course syllabi. Nine-year compulsory schooling again got new course syllabi in the autumn of 2011, by which time the empirical material for this paper had already been gathered.

### 3 SvEn in the Swedish school system

In connection with work on a new curriculum and syllabus for Swedish nine-year compulsory schooling introduced in 1994, the idea of a second compulsory foreign language was introduced. A government bill of the time discusses students' responsibility to study an additional language choice other than English (translated from Swedish by the author):

The Government believes that all students should be required to choose a language study option. For most people, this should focus on the possibility of studying a second foreign language. (Proposition 1992/93: 220)

However, the Proposition also states that some students may prefer not to study an additional foreign language, in which case they have the option of spending additional time studying English or Swedish. When the language choice concept was presented in 1994, the government referred to it in terms of "soft compulsoriness" (Regeringen 2007). This was established when a new curriculum was introduced in 1994 and remains in force in the curriculum introduced in 2011. This means that, in principle, all students in Sweden should study English and at least one additional language, i.e. French, Spanish, or German. Students of immigrant background could instead choose to study their mother tongue or Swedish as a second language. Finally, one more option was created: extra Swedish and/or English classes for pupils who choose not to study a third language. This was considered a reserve alternative for only a small number of students, and little attention was paid to what would actually be done in these classes. The vagueness of the curriculum regarding this option is probably why this aspect of elective language studies is not clearly regulated in *Grundskoleförordningen* (1994:1194), i.e. the Compulsory Schooling Ordinance, in which the relevant text governing the choice of studied languages is as follows:

As language option, a student could, instead of choosing any of the modern languages offered, instead choose one of the following language options if the pupil and the pupil's guardian so desire:

[...]

- Swedish as a second language for students who otherwise receive instruction in Swedish as a second language,
- Swedish for students who otherwise receive instruction in Swedish,
- English

In Swedish:

Som språkval för en elev skall i stället för språk [...] erbjudas följande språk, om eleven och elevens vårdnadshavare önskar det:

[...]

- svenska som andraspråk för elever som i övrigt får undervisning i svenska som andraspråk,
- svenska för elever som i övrigt får undervisning i svenska,
- engelska,

This is the only time the governing documents of compulsory schooling mention Swedish or English as alternatives to other modern languages. The curriculum does not explicitly mention SvEn as a language choice and there is no curriculum for SvEn. The Compulsory School Ordinance defines “subject” as an activity “for which the government has established a syllabus”. SvEn has no syllabus and is therefore, according to the terms of the Ordinance, not a subject. Students who choose SvEn will not be graded for their participation since it is not a formal subject. Instead of a syllabus of its own, teachers are to apply the same goals in SvEn as are used in regular Swedish and English language studies. This matter is not regulated in any governing documents; instead, Skolverket, i.e. the National Agency for Education, has indicated that the regular Swedish and English language studies curricula also apply to SvEn. The “subject” is not mentioned in the policy documents, except in the above quoted passage, and is given no official name, so each school must find its own way of referring to it. In the present article the term “SvEn” is used. A survey of 124 schools (Tholin & Lindqvist 2009) found that the most common name for this language option, used by 35 schools, was SvEn – sometimes SvEnG or Language SvEn(g) – but that 57 other names were used as well.

It soon became clear that the political aim of “soft compulsoriness” amounted to nothing. A great many students did not want to or could not study an additional language. In the 2011–2012 school year, 27% of grade nine students chose to study SvEn, 15% chose French, 18% German, and 37% Spanish, while a small number of immigrant students studied their mother tongue or Swedish as a second language (Skolverket 2012). Over the 18 years SvEn has been part of compulsory schooling, it has never been evaluated in any of the large national assessments of compulsory schooling conducted at regular intervals.

Sweden’s official school statistics, which divide students by sex, indicate that approximately 60% of those enrolled in SvEn are boys (Skolverket 2012). Otherwise we do not know who chooses SvEn. In the Swedish debate, more or less well-founded assumptions are sometimes made about SvEn students, for example, that they come from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, have failed their language studies, or have immigrant backgrounds. These assumptions, however, represent guesswork.

No research has focused on SvEn, though two reports on modern languages make passing mention of its activities. In 1999, Christer Sörensen of Uppsala University, commissioned by the National Agency for Education, conducted a pilot study of language choice, focusing on the modern languages (Skolverket 1999). He interviewed principals, teachers, and students at three schools. Sörensen reported that many SvEn students lacked motivation, stating that they chose SvEn because they did not want to study modern languages. They also said that SvEn teaching did not put heavy demands on them, and that absenteeism and lateness were common.

In 2003, Myndigheten för skolutveckling, i.e. the National Agency for School Development, conducted a study of language learning with students, parents, teachers, school leaders, and heads of school administration in five municipalities. The students who chose SvEn indicated that, while they felt they needed more help and practice in Swedish and/or English, it is difficult to learn anything in SvEn classes because of lack of discipline. Based on the student

comments, the study concludes that SvEn “is probably a big waste of class hours for many students” (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2003: 80).

In 2009, an analysis reviewing the history of language choice in Swedish schools examined the SvEn language option. The study also includes an analysis of official statistics about language studies and of Skolinspektionen (i.e. Swedish Schools Inspectorate) reports from school visits. The results of an electronic questionnaire completed by 124 heads of SvEn and 34 interviews with teachers and students in SvEn are reported in *Språkval svenska/engelska på grundskolan – en genomlysning* [Language choice Swedish/English in the nine-year compulsory schooling: an analysis] (Tholin & Lindqvist 2009). Parts of these interviews form the empirical basis of the present article.

This article is interested in what actually takes place in classrooms because the difference between what is called for in curricula and course syllabi and what actually takes place in the classroom has long been a topic of discussion in pedagogy research. Based on teacher interviews, this article examines teaching practices that render visible implied or unspoken assumptions and conditions how teaching can and should be carried out. Lindensjö and Lundgren’s (2000) two concepts of a *formulation arena*, i.e. various forms of political steering of curricula and course syllabi, and a *realization arena*, i.e. the teachers’ interpretations and implementations of these curricula and course syllabi, provide tools for interpretation. These arenas often vary considerably, as political decisions are neither unambiguous nor comprehensive, and teachers interpret and prioritize decisions in various ways. Studying SvEn classroom instruction within this theoretical framework is especially interesting as the formulation arena is nearly nonexistent. As mentioned earlier, the Compulsory School Ordinance states that students who do not study modern languages are to be offered Swedish or English. This is the only instance in which the activity is mentioned at the formulation level. Nothing is written about SvEn in the curriculum or course syllabus, or in the material giving the teachers advice, instructions, or commentary.

Other curriculum research offers additional tools for studying the multi-dimensionality of school steering systems. Schools are directed based partly on political decisions and central directives and partly on what is decided in each school; in addition, there are unwritten rules as well. The concept of “the hidden curriculum” is sometimes invoked to render visible those aspects of school practice not described in the steering documents but that students nevertheless learn in school. This includes learning to wait one’s turn, how to ask questions, and how to get help from the teacher, and understanding what parts of course content are more or less important – which, in the Swedish context, could be described as “the hidden course syllabus”. The concept of the hidden curriculum is usually attributed to Jackson (1990; for a detailed description of the concept, see Portelli 1993). Later researchers, such as Goodlad et al. (1979) and Cuban (1992), have differentiated the concept.

Goodson (1995) claims that a curriculum can be understood in terms of five dimensions. The *ideological* curriculum is the basic ideal that is operative when the curriculum is formulated and that forms the basis for its ways of thinking. The ideological curriculum, however, is not implemented completely, as political and pragmatic factors make this impossible. The *formal* curriculum is the actual curriculum that classroom activities follow but that is interpreted differently in different schools. The *understood* curriculum is how actors in

various schools understand the formal curriculum. School leaders, teachers, and parents may understand the formal curriculum in different ways. Similarly, teachers' previous teaching experiences or approaches to knowledge lead to different interpretations of the curriculum. The *implemented* curriculum is what actually takes place in the classroom. In addition, even for teachers who understand the curriculum in the same way, actual classroom practices may differ depending, for example, on their particular pupils. The *experienced* curriculum is what the students experience in the classroom. Teacher intentions and what their pupils actually learn can differ, but the experienced curriculum also includes the conscious or unconscious accentuations and emphases that teachers make and that, in turn, affect student impressions of what is most important. Another part of the experienced curriculum is the message often conveyed in classroom activities regarding, for example, matters of discipline and conduct. This this article is mostly concerned with the formal curriculum the understood curriculum and the implemented and the differences between them.

In the Swedish context, Goodson's five curriculum dimensions refer to curricula and course syllabi and provide tools for analyzing the lesson content described by teachers. Even though the rules and regulations governing SvEn are weak, the curriculum is still applicable, just as it is for all other activities in nine-year compulsory schooling, and the course syllabus for ordinary English studies also applies to SvEn. A central matter for Goodson is to what extent a new curriculum can create pedagogic renewal. He claims that teachers are often stuck in certain modes of work and have difficulties renewing these, despite new curricula, is what this study wants to explore

#### **4 English course syllabi**

Formulating a new course syllabus entails summing up the development of the subject. The group that draws up a new course syllabus must delve into the research findings and development work presented since the last course syllabus was drafted to determine what to include in the new one. This work will, in turn, influence how teachers understand the subject and how they will plan their teaching.

When teachers plan their teaching, there is reason to believe that they do so based on underlying assumptions about how learning occurs and that they organize classroom activities in accordance with these assumptions. Conveying an all-encompassing impression of the language learning assumptions that have existed over time in Sweden is impossible. As course syllabi often sum up the research and development work conducted in each subject area, the following survey of the course syllabi and their theoretical frameworks contributes to the present interpretation of the teachers' statements.

When the teaching of English and other modern languages was being established in the Swedish school system, there was no indigenous methodological tradition on which to fall back. However, there was an established method for teaching Latin, developed over the centuries in monasteries (McArthur 1983), with an emphasis on formal correctness and translation from Latin to the target language. This way of teaching languages,

the grammar–translation method, long dominated language teaching in Sweden. In the 1950s, English teaching still consisted mostly of reading texts and oral translation from English to Swedish, together with written translation, primarily from Swedish to English (Axelsson 2002).

The two first English course syllabi for the nine-year compulsory schooling, introduced in 1962 and 1969, closely resemble each other and can be viewed as reactions against the grammar–translation method. These course syllabi implemented what was called “the modified direct method”, based partly on the ideas of direct methodists such as Harold E. Palmer (1921) and partly on B.F. Skinner’s (1957) and the behaviourists’ stimulus–response model (Malmberg 1993). The modified direct method, as presented in Sweden, involved broad exposure to and immersion in language. The correctness of the presented language was considered essential, as incorrect habits might otherwise become imprinted (see e.g. Hensjö 1968). Accordingly, course syllabi were characterized by a high degree of detailed prescription. The method came to exert great influence on Swedish language teaching, largely because it formed part of two course syllabi jointly in force for 18 years, so that many later language teachers in Sweden were educated according to its precepts.

In 1980, new course syllabi were presented for the nine-year compulsory schooling. This time the detailed teaching instructions had disappeared, and the language course syllabi were instead characterized by a communicative view of language (Malmberg 1990; Tornberg 2000). In a comparison of the course syllabi in English in Lgr 62 (“Lgr” stands for the curriculum for the nine-year compulsory schooling), Lgr 69, and Lgr 80, Lindblad (1982) notes a change of focus. While the course syllabi of the 1960s had their point of departure in the teaching and what the teacher would do, Lgr 80 had its point of departure in the learning, or what the students are supposed to be able to do with their language. Internationally, Wilkins was a pioneer (1974, 1976) in this approach. He spoke of a “notional syllabus” that emanated from what the learner would do with the language and the situations in which the language would be used. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was above all British researchers who led the movement towards a more communicative view of language (Breen & Chandlin 1980; Brumfit 1984; Widdowson 1978). In the USA, Hymes was active, coining the concept of “communicative competence” (1966), which was developed by Canale and Swain (1980) into *grammatical*, *sociolinguistic*, and *strategic competence*. Krashen (1982) argued that the teacher’s task was to provide an interesting linguistic content, a “wee bit over” the learner’s linguistic level. In this way, the language would develop, without the need to focus on linguistic rules.

The next course syllabus for English came 14 years later, in 1994. It was characterized by the concept that had dominated language didactics in the 1980s and 1990s – communicative language learning – and contained almost no instructions regarding content. The course syllabus was influenced by the work on language and language learning undertaken by the Council of Europe (Andered 2001). The concept of intercultural understanding was introduced. Relevant influences in this regard included Kramersch’s (1993) discussion of language as a tool for both organizing and changing reality, and Byram’s (1997) concept of intercultural communicative competence. The course syllabus was influenced by the work on learner autonomy of the Council of Europe, as presented by Holec (1979) and Little (1991) via Swedish interpretations presented by, for example, Thavenius (1990), Eriksson and Miliander (1991), and

Tholin (1992). The course syllabus was also influenced by research into strategies for learning foreign languages and how these may affect language teaching (Stern 1983; Wenden 1991; O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

In 2000, the course syllabi for nine-year compulsory schooling were revised. For the modern languages, the course syllabi were inspired by the efforts of the Council of Europe to create a six-level "framework" for language learning and assessing language knowledge, presented in *A Common European Framework* (Council of Europe 2003). The course syllabi constituted a seven-step system applying to English and all modern languages in both nine-year compulsory schooling and upper secondary school (Andered 2001). The new course syllabi were closely associated with the language work of the Council of Europe, in terms of both organization and content. The concepts emphasized as central to English teaching were communication, internationalization, information technology, and culture (Malmberg 2001). Language learning strategies were still emphasized and an extensive Swedish research project on the matter was published in 2000 (Bergström et al. 2000). The new course syllabi represented a continuation along the path of removing formulations that could be understood as instructions about content and methods (Skolverket 2004a).

## 5 Data, participants and methods

In 2008, a colleague, AnnaKarin Lindqvist, and I were commissioned by the then National Agency for School Development to analyse SvEn activities. In the framework of this project, we interviewed 17 SvEn teachers from eight schools selected to be as representative as possible of Swedish schools. Geographically, the schools were widely distributed, located in municipalities of various sizes and representing both big cities and sparsely-populated areas. They represented different socioeconomic areas and differed in how many students chose SvEn. Both municipal and independent schools were represented in the sample.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews, which were semi-structured, contained questions about all aspects of the SvEn option, for example, about organization, what students choose SvEn, how and why new language options are chosen eg. in mid-year, how the SvEn groups function, lesson content, and the status of SvEn. The interview method had the advantage of enabling the teachers to speak relatively freely, while also permitting follow-up questions to be asked.

The study includes 17 teachers who teach SvEn. One of them is an art teacher who has taught SvEn for many years but who lacks teacher training in English, while the other 16 all have Bachelor of Education degrees that cover English. Six of the teachers are trained for teaching young children (i.e. elementary school teachers, intermediate-level teachers, and grades 1–7 teachers). Three of the teachers work as special needs teachers, and two of these later supplemented their degrees with additional English studies. Of the remaining nine, five have Bachelor of Education degrees in English and Swedish, two in English and German, one in English and Physical Education, and one in English and Music.

The formulation arena-realization arena concept pair together with Goodson's five curriculum dimensions provide analytical tools, but a structure for classifying teachers' statements in interviews is also required. For this

purpose, we initially chose to employ the same structure as is found in the course syllabus for English from 2000. This refers to *receptive skills*, i.e. student capacity to understand spoken and written English, *interactive skills*, i.e. ability to initiate, contribute to the development of, and conclude a conversation or correspondence, and *productive skills*, i.e. the ability to speak and write clearly and coherently. The curriculum also establishes goals for students' understanding of intercultural issues and of how their own language learning occurs.

It became apparent that these were not relevant factors. The teachers instead spoke in terms of a more traditional division of language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing, so using these four skills as factors for classification and analysis made better sense. Furthermore, many teachers spoke of grammar as a skill in its own right, while others also cited the use or non-use of teaching media as another factor that shaped their teaching. Accordingly, we applied the following factors in the analysis:

- listening
- speaking
- reading
- writing
- grammar
- teaching media

The classification and analysis were conducted based on what the teachers said about these six factors. The analytical work was carried out by repeatedly reading the material, paying particular attention to what the teachers said about their lesson activities, their reasons for using them, and their results in relation to the six abovementioned factors. In the analysis, patterns, similarities, and differences in the teachers' statements were sought, so it is based on the content and not on the language of the interviews. One other person read the interview transcripts and helped verify the categories identified. As the final stage of the analysis, the categories were connected to curricula.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Different teacher orientations to SvEn

The analysis of the interviews demonstrates that many teachers have well-thought-out strategies for English teaching, though they are not always successful in realizing these in classroom practice. Despite the fact that the interviewed teachers say that underachieving students need more class time to succeed in their studies, many of them simultaneously describe the difficulty of filling the SvEn classes with relevant content. Not one of the interviewees spontaneously refers to current curricula and course syllabi, referring to these only when asked directly. When they describe lesson content, they instead borrow thoughts and ideas from earlier curricula and course syllabi.

None of the interviewed teachers criticizes the English course syllabus goals, nor do they regard the goals as set too high. Individual teachers mention

that the course syllabi are difficult to interpret and that the teaching goals are not clearly enough expressed, but the teachers generally seem to agree with the course syllabi regarding the goals for the subject and the level of knowledge expected. There is complete agreement between the teachers regarding the need to spend more time with students who do not achieve the goals or who risk not doing so. Teacher desire for more time to spend with underachieving students is nothing new, and has been reported earlier in both Sweden (Eriksson & Lindblad 1987) and Denmark (Danmarks evalueringsintitut 2003); in both cases, the teachers had difficulties concretizing what such extra time would be used for.

This paper describes the most typical ways of teachers' thinking that emerge in the data, discussed here with individual teachers; four as representative examples of different categories and one conveying an untypically straightforward view of students.

### 6.1.1 Special needs teachers

One group of studied teachers, here represented by Ingmar, do not do any actual language teaching, neither in SvEn nor in general. Like the other two teachers in this category, Ingmar is a trained teacher of young children who now works mainly as a special needs teacher. These teachers do not consider themselves language teachers when they give SvEn classes. It is therefore impossible to speak of any language learning assumptions that underlie their teaching. They ignore English and do not really teach Swedish either, but in interview refer to the fact that many of their pupils' assignments in other subjects involve reading and writing. Without saying so explicitly, they seem to be implying that most school assignments develop language, at least in Swedish. The teachers in this category say the same thing: if the pupils read and write, "there will be some Swedish" – as one teacher put it.

Several times the teachers emphasize that it is important to keep the students busy. This seems to be a superior principle to them – i.e. that the students are working is more important than *what* they are working on – leading to the likely interpretation that discipline is more important than learning to the teachers in this group. They do not seem to have the methodological or didactic tools to change their teaching. This could, of course, be either a cause or effect of their not making any fundamental assumptions about how language learning occurs. They say that they want to change things, but obviously have not succeeded in making these changes.

In Ingmar's case, the differences between the formal, understood, and implemented curriculum are huge, although Ingmar does not reflect on them. The principal at Ingmar's school is well aware that Ingmar's teaching is not aligned with either the central or local intentions of the SvEn activities, intentions that the principal himself took part in formulating, nor does he regard this as problematic. Both he and Ingmar instead view Ingmar's activities as "special teaching", irrespective of what the timetable says. It seems as if it is the very weak SvEn formulation arena that creates room in the realization arena for such a broad interpretation of how to shape class content. In a subject with a course syllabus and grading criteria it is impossible to ignore the subject-specific contents in the same way.

Ingmar believes that students with difficulties in English should be given more classroom time to work on the same activities as in the ordinary classes as illustrated by the following quote.

The students can use the same material as in the ordinary English classes but take more time. It's time they need, not material.

This claim, however, seems unsupported when he describes what actually takes place in the classes. The students work on what they feel they need to: they do homework, prepare for tests, finish assignments. The assignments are not necessarily about language or language development; instead, the students spend the classes doing schoolwork in all subjects. This take is illustrated for example in the following quote.

Why, the content is optional – it's so different in different periods. Now they are going to have a physics test next week, so they just want to prepare for that and test each other. And when they have a maths test it's only about that. You don't know what will happen in the classes, what they will bring ... if they don't bring anything they will go and get something. Sometimes it's a book that they sit down to read. That's common before a holiday when they have had a test and there is less to do.

The class content does not correspond to the intentions for SvEn, but Ingmar believes that the most important thing is to keep the students occupied and for them to "get ahead". He also believes that there must be time in school for underachieving students to do homework and finish assignments.

Because, ok, with the language choice, but I don't know if it has to be Swedish and English. Because we see where the student has problems and it's on that basis that we fit this in [i.e. customize the teaching]. If we see that they have a problem with NO [i.e. science subjects] we'll work on that. ... Well, we do include some English, but not so very much because we work on SO [i.e. civics] and such things.

All the work in Ingmar's classes is done in Swedish. He says that he would like to spend more class time studying English, but he cannot explain why he has not adapted the class content to do so.

### 6.1.2 Direct method teachers

Another group of teachers (3 out of 17), represented by Lars, have a concept of language learning influenced by the view of language acquisition prevalent in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s. To these teachers, it is not self-evident that all students should learn English. They believe that students, at least underachieving ones, can learn only one language at a time. This also applies to students with Swedish as their mother tongue. These students first need to have reached a certain level of competence in Swedish before they can learn English. This is the same argument that was made by opponents of compulsory English learning when nine-year compulsory schooling was to be introduced. In understanding how languages are best learnt, these teachers make assumptions

that correspond to the modified direct method as presented in the curricula of 1962 and 1969. In this view, students learn language by reinforcing correct linguistic patterns; if they make mistakes, they will practice the same exercise several times to reinforce the correct language pattern. However, their focus on grammar and spelling does not have a direct counterpart in the curricula from 1962 and 1969, which view grammar as a means and not as an end in itself. These early course syllabi, however, stress the importance of having the pupils reinforce correct grammatical patterns, and the course syllabus from 1962 additionally lists the grammatical material that should be practiced during the nine-year compulsory schooling.

It may seem as though the formal, understood, and implemented curricula differ greatly, but this is only the case if such teaching is seen in relation to the current curricula and course syllabi. If the curriculum from 1969 is seen as the formal curriculum and their teaching is seen in relation to it, the difference between the formal and the implemented curricula is small. The lack of guidance from the formulation arena, for these teachers, has been replaced by the textbook: for them, the textbook corresponds to the formulation arena on which they model their teaching, their realization arena.

Lars believes that students with difficulties in Swedish should not study English at all, but instead concentrate fully on Swedish.

Why, it's not reasonable that students who can hardly express themselves intelligibly in Swedish should study English as well.

When students have difficulties with English, more practice is required. Lars says that students need to undertake organized activities to learn a language – just letting them do homework, for example, will not produce results. The work needs to be structured and followed up by the teacher; otherwise, the students risk learning mistakes that can be difficult to unlearn. He says that his teaching is structured and that it produces results for his pupils. He works with the same material as in the ordinary classes, but repeats and practices it more.

Material, well, it does become much the same. We have tried a fair number of different things. We use *Wings* [i.e. name of teaching media] in the big groups, and then there is an easier variant that is very good because quite a few things are the same, and repetition is good. Then there are some other books, but, yes, I take a lot from *Wings* because the weak ones need very structured teaching.

He emphasizes grammar and spelling. The students also need to drill words and vocabulary and to have the opportunity to “put together sentences.” Underachieving students need more time, not necessarily new assignments, Lars says. For example, he feels that it might be good for students, under teacher supervision, to repeat homework that they have already completed, to reinforce knowledge and skills that need repetition, a view of teaching that echoes views of language that emphasize drilling as way to automatization.

We use the same material as in the ordinary English class. We work on what they are already working on. They bring the material. They get to work

extra on the vocabulary, or on some grammatical material. The most important thing is to give them time to reinforce their knowledge.

One of Lars' concerns is that SvEn offers so much time. It can be difficult to find enough relevant activities for the students. He says that he at times "fills in time" with, for example, free reading or lets the students watch a film without subtitles even if he does not actually believe that they learn anything from this.

What can we do then? Well, we can sit watching a film or something or we can do some maths or something, but you don't feel that this is at all what they should be doing ... SvEn can be used a bit for doing homework, largely depending on what student it is.

### 6.1.3 Communicative approach

Nine teachers organize their English classes based on two basic assumptions about language learning rooted in early 1980s concepts. For these teachers, the implemented curriculum should be understood in light of the curriculum and course syllabus in force between 1980 and 1994. They believe, first, that students learn through immersion in a wide range of language and, second, that it is important that students be motivated to learn English. Both these beliefs are inspired by the communicative view of language acquisition as it was interpreted in the 1980s. Like the other teachers, they believe that underachieving pupils need more time to learn the language, but they do not believe that this extra time is needed simply so students can "cram" material or practice correcting prior mistakes. They instead believe that pupils must undertake novel activities, and be exposed to a wide-ranging and interesting influx of language. They link this line of reasoning to their second assumption that motivation is decisive. They believe that simply repeating old assignments will not motivate students to learn, nor do they believe that working in a new textbook at a simpler level advances student learning. There is instead a risk that such tactics may make students feel stigmatized, draining them of motivation.

These teachers would like their pupils to practise basic skills in SvEn classes, but in a way that differs from how the students work in their ordinary English classes. They are inspired by notions of communicative language teaching. They believe it is important that their pupils actually *use* the language, and that this should occur in authentic and relevant situations. A dilemma is that they do not always have the tools to turn these ideas into teaching practice. Many of these teachers have a clear idea of the type of teaching they do *not* want to do, but no concrete ideas of what activities they should actually undertake. They lack ideas concerning the content of the teaching, and when they have spare time, they simply let their pupils work on assignments from all school subjects to keep them occupied. An activity that many of them describe as successful – i.e. watching films without subtitles – also satisfies their desire to keep their pupils busy. The students do not discuss the films they have seen, write about them, or learn new words and expressions from them. It is, as the teachers describe it, a passive activity – some of the teachers use the term "a breathing hole".

Their teaching seems inspired by the approach that holds that students learn English best through immersion in language. It is the course syllabus of 1980 that informs the understood curriculum according to which these teachers work, but they have difficulties arriving at an implemented curriculum based on this. Another way of expressing this would be to say that these teachers lack both a clearly experienced formulation arena and a realization arena. These teachers have left behind the textbooks that function as a sort of formulation arena for others, but have not replaced them with anything that can structure and support their teaching.

To further illustrate the teachers who are inspired by notions of communicative language teaching, two teachers sharing the same basic concept of language teaching, Ingrid and Björn, are described. What was most noteworthy about the interview with Björn was his view of his pupils. Among the teachers in this study, Björn is the one for whom the difference is the greatest between what he thinks about the theory of language learning and how he organizes his teaching in practice. How he speaks *of* his pupils, and the way in which he says that he speaks *to* them, indicates considerable differences in his mind between the understood and experienced curricula. He embraces a communicative approach, at least in theory, and talks about the importance of motivate his students but at the same time as he describes his own pupils as a “group of lazybones”. We do not know how Björn’s bitterness and cynicism affect his pupils, but it is difficult to imagine that he could succeed in motivating underachievers to learn English. Björn expresses an approach to students shared by four teachers (one from the group referred to as Direct method teachers in the study, three from the group Communicative approach), although he goes furthest in his comments. In the interviews, these teachers call their pupils “lazy” and refer to them using words such as “slack”, “unmotivated”, “uninterested”, and “less gifted”. Björn speaks of having tried various activities with his pupils, but says that he has not “got anything back.” Perhaps this explains his resignation regarding to all of these activities, a resignation that he shares with others. Ingrid has essentially the same thoughts about how to teach language, but a different view of her pupils.

Björn actually does not want SvEn to exist. He believes that all students should study one additional foreign language and he does not want to teach SvEn students.

It’s mentally demeaning and insulting having to teach these groups. You never get anything back and half of them don’t come to class. They never do anything. They are just a group of lazybones who want to chat away the time. Everybody has to study languages! In the framework of this system, SvEn should be removed for the Swedish student of average intelligence. It’s the language teacher’s responsibility to make sure that the students pass.

However, SvEn does exist, so when he teaches SvEn, his point of departure is that students learn a language best through being immersed in it. He wants the students to read a lot of books and watch a lot of English films without subtitles and, through this immersion, develop their language skills.

If we take the group that I have in ninth grade and that I have had since seventh grade. Well, it's a very weak group, and in that group I have read aloud a lot to them ... I bring a lot of books there and I talk about them and show them and then they actually pick out books to read themselves.

He wants SvEn to be more fun and more useful than ordinary English classes, so the content must be different. The school has purchased textbooks for SvEn, but that is a decision that he had no part in and of which he is sceptical. He does not use the books as he believes that the SvEn classes would in that case resemble ordinary English classes too much. When he lets the students work on assignments, he uses assignments from the ordinary textbook that the students have not had the time to complete. He believes it is important that the students get a lot of class time.

I have picked up on what they are doing and what is important and what goes wrong - for example, irregular verbs - where you then can get to the bottom [of the problem] and spend enough time on it because we have an insane amount of time. When it was really bad, I think we had 170 minutes - time never ended in a way - it was completely hopeless.

At the same time he feels that SvEn requirements are set too low, even in the teaching that he undertakes. He believes that SvEn teaching can sometimes be compared to "therapy" and that the most important thing is to ensure that the pupils actually attend the classes.

Half of the students will skip class. These are not students with parents who are particularly encouraging, as they allow their children to skip things just like that when it's a bit difficult - "Oh dear, you shouldn't have to take SvEn, my little one." There are students who have crossed out SvEn from their timetable - "I'm free then" - and the parents know about it ... You just have to keep them in the classroom so that they don't hang around in the corridors or disappear to the North Pole or somewhere else ... Students who are just lazy sort of fall in through the doors and, well, then you can't do anything - I advise the cleverest students against coming. Why should they sit here for hours and do middle school work? It's ridiculous. It's demoralizing to have this type of activity.

Another example of teachers sharing a similar view of teaching language as Björn is Ingrid who teaches students whom she regards as very underachieving. She believes that for these students it is important that the teaching content is useful and authentic. The weakest students need to see the use of learning a language, so the teaching needs to be concrete, and it must be at a level that makes the students feel successful in their studies.

They need a lot of help - more opportunities to succeed, more time will save many. They need to be able to work on things they find interesting. Why, this is their last chance so they need to see opportunities and possibilities. There is a way out of Spanish but there is no way out of SvEn.

The students use teaching media in their ordinary classes, and simpler versions are bought in for the students in SvEn. However, she does not use them very much as she believes that the students cannot spend the classes doing more of what they have already done, and failed doing. Nor does she believe that the classes should be spent on grammar or writing.

We watch a lot of films. Many students are tired ... and this can be a class that perhaps is something of a “breathing hole”. So then we watch a lot of films without subtitles to just ... Because they need to hear a lot of English. I find that it helps that, instead of sitting with a lot of things to write and a lot of grammar, they can become good and secure at talking and understanding and also at listening.

She feels that her pupils need to improve their listening, reading, and speaking. She fosters this improvement by showing a lot of films without subtitles, so that her pupils can practise and improve their listening. However, she seems to have inadequate resources as regards the ways in which to help them improve their speaking and understanding.

We tried the old national tests this fall and reviewed the different parts, and then I came to understand that some of them really need to get better at listening, reading, and talking. But it’s difficult to make it work.

Ingrid finds it difficult to find enough class activities to fill the teaching period. She says that they have too much time, so she slips in material from other subjects.

#### **6.1.4 Learner autonomy**

Of the teachers interviewed, two are influenced in their thinking about language teaching by the work of the Council of Europe and by the work of researchers who have influenced the Council. The Council’s work on learner autonomy emphasizes that language and language learning cannot or should not be seen as isolated from the individual’s personal development. What is also emphasized is the importance of language teachers themselves influencing the planning, implementation, and assessment of their teaching. These are ideas that the two teachers in question embrace. However, their problem is that they have difficulties converting this general approach into classroom practice and in finding motivation for the task.

These teachers observe that students need a lot of stability and structure, and have difficulties combining this knowledge with giving them real opportunities to make their own choices. The two studied teachers who are inspired by the idea of learner autonomy report the same difficulties. In both cases, they observe that the implemented curriculum gives the students opportunities to make their own choices, while not encouraging them to reflect on and be aware of their own learning, so as to improve their choices. These teachers strive more actively in their language teaching than do those teachers for whom broad language exposure and immersion are the most important things. For example, these teachers let their pupils watch English films, but follow up on this activity by having them talk or write about the films. They also

speak of their pupils being unmotivated, some of them having lost their desire to learn English after earlier failures, and they feel that they have not found ways to arouse enthusiasm in them again.

Lisa represents the teachers in this group, who have ideas about how to change their teaching but who obviously lack the tools to make the desired changes. Lisa's basic approach to language teaching can be summed up as the belief that the student needs to develop as a human being to develop linguistically. To her, language teaching is as much about building intimate relationships, about strengthening and confirming her pupils in their personal growth, as it is about teaching them language in a more traditional way.

Why, these are weak students. They need to know that they are good enough and that what they do is good. They need to know that they can trust me. I believe that is important for them to learn anything at all.

Consequently, Lisa prefers to teach the pupils in SvEn whom she also teaches in the regular English and Swedish classes. She has some ideas of her own about how students can and should work in the SvEn framework, but she says that she sometimes feels resigned to the task.

My group in ninth grade - it's a very difficult group and they are very tired. There are some boys there who probably should not have to do it. I have tried everything, and it feels very difficult ... not being able to help them, because there isn't any drive or motivation.

She identifies English reading comprehension as an area in which many students have difficulties. For students in grade nine, SvEn allows them to practise before, and after, the national test in English. She does not, however, want to dictate what the students should do in SvEn. She wants the SvEn classes to give the students time to practise difficult skills, while being experienced as fun by offering activities for which there is insufficient time in the ordinary language classes. She therefore encourages the students to plan and carry out their own work. In this way, SvEn becomes an avenue for the students to develop linguistically while learning to take more responsibility for themselves and their own learning.

Sometimes they bring their own material, sometimes they continue with what they are doing in [the regular] English [class]. That's often enough, because they need a bit more time and get more time in a small group. There are [only] fourteen, so that gives me more time. And there is time to sit and read and talk, supporting them when needed. Student-directed work at their own initiative. But of course not everybody has the situation under control, and then I need to help them.

Lisa says that it is often difficult for students to identify what they have problems with and how to work systematically to address these problematic areas. These difficulties result in Lisa herself directing the learning more than she would like to. At such times, the students work from a simpler version of the textbook used in the ordinary English class, and frequently watch films without subtitles.

Sometimes we do something together ... like watching an English film without subtitles and talking or writing about the film afterwards ... things that are difficult to find time for in the regular lessons. It also becomes a bit more enjoyable.

## Discussion

As suggested above, the teachers' statements about lesson activities, and about the reasons for them, fall into four categories that correspond well to the view of the subject English that formed part of course syllabi from the 1960s up to 1994. The teachers agree that underachieving students need more time to succeed, but believe that SvEn gives them too much time. Since they do not know how to use the extra available time, many of their classes are filled with content from other subjects. The most common class activity involving English is to watch English films without subtitles. Several teachers in SvEn do not use textbooks, but this does not mean that they have developed new language teaching ideas.

Why has SvEn not resulted in teachers' finding new ways to teach language? Goodson (1995) believes that teachers have difficulties freeing themselves from old patterns when new curricula and course syllabi are introduced. Several studies since the 1980s have demonstrated that language teachers in Sweden are offered few opportunities after their basic education for additional subject-oriented education (Eriksson & Lindblad 1987; Dahlgren & Leoj 1997; Skolverket 2004b), which probably contributes to poor preparedness to adopt changes. In the national evaluation of education conducted in 2003, about three quarters of English teachers stated that they needed further education, primarily in language didactics (Skolverket 2004c).

The teachers' accounts of SvEn classes raise some questions. The most obvious problem is the contradiction between the teacher claim that underachieving students need more class time, and the reality that teachers do not know what to do with the extra time they already have. To this needs to be added the fact that most do not feel that their current teaching is working very well. They state that they have tried and rejected various teaching ideas. There is thus reason to question whether additional class time alone is enough to improve the condition of underachieving language students. A parallel is found in the development of the modern languages in Sweden, French, Spanish, and German, which had their teaching hours increased by 25% in 1994. This, however, did not result in more students achieving the modern language learning goals (Skolverket 2000).<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, language teachers have repeatedly claimed a connection between how much time is spent on teaching languages and the results their pupils achieve. There is reason to problematize why teachers continue to argue that underachieving students need more class time when they have so much time that they cannot fill it. This study makes it clear that teachers are reasoning at two different levels. At a general level, structurally, more class time is considered necessary for underachieving students. The fact that the teachers cannot themselves fill the time that is currently available is not seen by them as a structural problem but as a personal failing. Many teachers also describe

having unsuccessfully tried various approaches in the SvEn classes. Why do teachers understand this lack of success as a personal failing? One explanation is probably found in the discrepancy between the various dimensions of the curriculum, i.e. the *ideological curriculum* with the idea that all, or almost all, students should study an additional foreign language, the *formal curriculum* in which SvEn is offered as an alternative without appearing as an equivalent to the foreign languages, and the *understood curriculum* in which SvEn is the alternative that most students choose. Schools, students, and parents did not perceive a “soft compulsoriness”, as a quarter of the students do not study foreign languages.

If SvEn is to remain as an activity in Swedish schools, interwoven organizational and didactic changes are required. The problems that the teachers describe are, in part, that they do not know what to do in SvEn class and, in part, that they view their class failings as personal and not organizational matters. This means that for a change to occur it is necessary that the activity be made visible in the formal curriculum. As long as SvEn is not visible in any official context, there are only restricted possibilities to discuss, develop, or change it. Making the activity visible means, for example, that it would have to be evaluated, and that the National Agency for Education would have to provide advice and instructions. As the activity has been neglected for such a long time, the state and municipalities must allocate considerable resources for SvEn development work.

The teachers in this study believe that underachieving students need more class time to develop their English skills. The activities carried out in SvEn over 18 years in Sweden indicate that it is not enough simply to allow teachers more time, and leave them with the task of figuring out what to do with that time. In SvEn classes, teachers must often deal with students who are not motivated to study language. Doing something for such students requires that teachers jointly develop their teaching practice. This could occur through the meeting of teachers from different schools and municipalities. Considering that the teachers in the study so often fall back on older notions of how language learning takes place, the development work should be tied to teacher participation in modern language didactic research. At the same time, teachers need the opportunity to carry out and document development work of their own. An area that is particularly neglected and in which research is greatly needed concerns how students of immigrant background develop not only in their mother tongue and in Swedish, but in a foreign language such as English. Naturally, this becomes even more difficult when a formulation arena is completely missing.

Nothing in the present study indicates that more class time has had any real effect on language learning outcomes. However, there are many indications that one cannot run school activities without a clear formulation arena.

Another fact worth mentioning is that SvEn exists because students can choose *not* to study another language in addition to English. It is assumed that compulsory schooling should, through its required subjects and their content, define what all Swedish children “need to know” to function as members of society. This has been a basic assumption since the start of compulsory schooling in Sweden. The exception to this rule are modern languages, which, except for English and Swedish, were elective.

This study demonstrates that there is no successful way to offer students additional classroom hours in just one subject to help them succeed better. Many

teachers and school leaders say that students mainly choose SvEn because they need extra help to achieve the objectives of Swedish and/or English language studies. It is inconceivable, however, that an average of 30% of all students in the ninth grade should need more time than allotted in ordinary language classes to achieve the objectives. It has therefore repeatedly been claimed that SvEn “is probably a waste of time for many students” (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2003), and it probably is, but it should not have to be that way. No time at school should be a waste of time for any student. It is for this reason that the authors of this article suggest in a 2009 report (Tholin & Lindqvist 2009) that all students should study a compulsory language in addition to English, which could be a modern language or the student’s mother tongue in the case of a student of immigrant background, in compulsory schooling and that SvEn be abolished. This recommendation has caused some public controversy but has also highlighted the problematic nature of SvEn. On 1 July 2010, the government commissioned the National Agency for Education “to identify and propose measures to encourage more students to choose modern languages as a language choice and to develop Swedish/English” (Skolverket 2011). The Agency proposed on 31 January 2011 that studying a second language in addition to English be required in compulsory schooling.

The Ministry of Education has not yet officially responded to the National Agency for Education’s proposal. Secretary of State Bertil Östberg has twice commented on SvEn in the magazine *Alfa*. In an interview from 2010, he said that learning another foreign language in addition to English cannot be made compulsory because it is considered too difficult by many students. When asked why chemistry – also often considered difficult – is not also an elective, he replied that chemistry was more important than learning an additional foreign language (Alfa 2010). In a later interview from April 2011, after the Agency had submitted its proposal, he said that the government was very hesitant to make another modern language in addition to English compulsory, but he also pointed out that the government felt great reluctance to deal with the matter of SvEn:

It [i.e. SvEn] is an odd construct that does not work, but exactly how it should be handled we do not yet know (Alfa 2011).

This paper has, hopefully, served as a step towards answering how language studies, and SvEn, should be handled to make them more worthwhile for students and teachers alike.

## Endnotes

- 1) During the school visits, we also interviewed school leaders, teachers of modern languages, and students. In some cases we, observed lessons in SvEn classes. The results are reported in *Språkval svenska/engelska på grundskolan – en genomlysning* [Swedish/English language choice in nine-year compulsory schooling – an analysis] (Tholin & Lindqvist, 2009).
- 2) At the course syllabus revision conducted in 2000, the requirements for the modern language goals were lowered, but this did not help more students to attain the goals (Skolverket 2000).

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