“I can tell a story that my dads friend tell me”

A corpus- and interview-based study on grammar education, with focus on verb forms.

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Abstract
This study consists of two methods: textual analysis and interviews, which are based on text from *The Uppsala Learner English Corpus* (ULEC), and teachers as interview objects. The textual analysis investigates errors made by students in year seven and year nine, regarding the construction of different verb forms in written English essays. A potential difference between errors made in year seven and nine is also examined. Moreover, the interview based analysis investigates professional junior high school teachers’ teaching methods and attitudes towards grammar. The errors investigated in the textual analysis are compared with the responses of the teachers’ perception of common errors in verb forms made by their students.

The textual analysis showed that the most common errors made regard spelling within the verb phrase, auxiliary verbs, subject-verb agreement, and irregular verbs, and that year seven had a higher frequency of errors than year nine in most categories, even if the results differed inconsiderably.

The analysis of the interviews of the teachers found that teachers, in general, enjoy grammar, and aim to have a student-centered approach, however, the teachers testify of characteristics of traditional teacher-centered grammar teaching. It is reasoned that traditional teacher-centered grammar teaching is fundamentally established, where teachers today appear not to acquire the tools to move away from the teacher-centered approach onwards to a student-centered grammar teaching.

We reason that the education of L2 teachers needs to be reformed and provide tools to help teachers achieve a student-centered approach, and therein enable students to become more successful in grammar.

Key words: Second Language Acquisition, Verb forms, Grammar, Teaching method, Attitude, Swedish, English.
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1. Introduction

As both of us can recollect, our grammar teaching in elementary school was inadequate, especially in high school. The lack of grammar teaching resulted in a difficult transfer into the academic world. As teacher trainees, we felt compelled to educate ourselves, research, and learn more about Second Language Acquisition (SLA)\(^1\) and grammar teaching. Hence, this study emphasizes the aspect from both sides: the errors of students as well as teaching methods, and attitudes towards grammar amongst teachers. These inquiries are aligned with students and teachers in junior high school. It is our conviction that we need to acquire knowledge of the perspectives of both students and teachers to ensure a grammar teaching with successful results. Consequently, we have used two methods to collect data, textual analysis and interviews. Mikaela Lorenzi is responsible for the textual analysis, and Sofia Bergström of conducting the interviews.

We would like to take the opportunity to thank our eminent tutor, Christine Johansson, for her excellent guidance and support.

\(^{1}\) The definition of SLA can be found in section 3.2.1
2. Background

In Sweden, we are daily exposed to the English language via a range of areas such as politics, education, and economics, where our language knowledge is constantly put to the test (LGR11, 2011:32). A recent report from EF’s English Proficiency Index (EPI) presents that Swedes are best in the world at English as a second or foreign language (2015:8). Despite the fact that Swedes have been ranked as number one in the EPI, there are areas in the English education where students generally do not perform as well as in others (The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI), 2010:18).

In the curriculum of English in junior high school, the core content declares that students should learn “[l]anguage phenomena to clarify, vary and enrich communication such as pronunciation, intonation, and fixed language expressions, grammatical structures and sentence structures” (Lgr11, 2011:35). However, according to SSI’s qualitative review of the English subject in year nine, the weakest skill amongst students is grammar (2010:17). They also proclaim that “[e]ven if grammar is not taught as separate parts, the education ought to provide an opportunity to achieve grammatical comprehension to that extent required to develop a correct use of language” (2010:20). In other words, SSI addresses the necessity of adding a greater focus on grammar teaching in order to give the students a fair chance to develop a correct use of language. It is also evident that the English subject is of utter importance, evident by the fact that it is compulsory from the lower ages in elementary school all the way up to high school, where the courses English 5 and 6 are preparatory for higher academic studies (Lgr11, 2011:31; Gy11, 2011:54, 60).

Historically, foreign language was originally something privileged to the upper classes of society, mainly focused on French and German. Later, the English language and culture influenced the practical and pedagogical aspects, which made the advantages of studying English clear. Subsequently to the Swedish national curriculum of 1962, English became compulsory from fourth grade (Bernhardsson, 2011:268-269).

Today, the access of studies concerning SLA is extensive. Even published literature such as Estling Vanneståhl’s *A University Grammar of English with a Swedish Perspective* (2007) focuses on grammar teaching and learning English from a Swedish perspective. Other researchers, Nassaji and Fotos, assert that “[w]ithout grammar, language does not exist. However, nothing in the field of language pedagogy has been as controversial as the role of grammar teaching” (2011:1).

The purpose of this study is to examine recurring verb form errors of students in year seven and nine, and investigate which grade produces more or less errors frequently. The study also aims to investigate teaching methods and attitudes towards grammar amongst junior high school teachers. This study is carried out by using materials from *The Uppsala Learner English Corpus* (ULEC), as well as interviews with teachers based on questions regarding their grammar teaching and teaching of verb forms.

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2 Our own translation
3. Review of literature

The following sections contain information about previous research in relation to our study, and the theoretical perspectives and definitions used throughout this study.

3.1 Previous research

As previously mentioned, grammar teaching has been highly debated, especially its significance in SLA (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011:1). However, research conducted on Swedish students and teachers has to our knowledge not been much investigated. Therefore, in the sections below, research conducted on students from various countries is presented. The purpose of this section is to briefly present thematized previous research within the categories of Teaching grammar, Learning a second language, and finally, Attitudes towards grammar teaching.

3.1.1 Teaching grammar

Depending on if English is an L1, ESL (English as a Second Language) or EFL (English as a Foreign Language), we must presume that the teaching and learning of grammar can vary. As previously mentioned, the lack of studies on Swedish teachers and students in EFL-classrooms has forced us to use studies based on students in other classrooms, both L1-classrooms and EFL- and ESL-classrooms.

In a dissertation, Lena Boström (2004) examines the various teaching methods, and their advantages contra disadvantages, as well as students’ perceptions on teaching methods and styles of learning. The purpose of the study aims to investigate the teaching of Swedish grammar, more precisely, focusing on two separate types of teaching methods: teacher-centered approach and student-centered approach (Boström, 2004:22). She emphasizes that successful learning leads to successful results, which is why the students’ learning styles have to be taken into consideration. Hence, four senses are used: the visual (learning by seeing), the auditive (learning by listening), the tactile (hands-on learning), and the kinesthetic (learning by experiencing, moving, and feeling) (ibid:19).

Boström’s data was collected via surveys and interviews (ibid:89-124). She discovered in her thesis that:

[T]he teachers of Swedish think that the grammar section is rather important to students. There are, however, diverse opinions concerning how grammar should be classified and how education should be provided as an individual element or integrated into the writing practice. This study also pointed out that many teachers of Swedish think that knowledge of grammar brings concept formation into language, which mainly is important in the process of learning.

3 Definitions of L1 and L2 can be found in section 3.2.1
Even though Boström does not research the English subject area in her study, it is most relevant since it investigates teaching methods and attitudes in relation to grammar teaching, however, the skills of a learner in EFL and ESL may depend on the student’s nationality and the frequency of the exposure of the target language therein.

Gilquin and Granger (2011) investigate the differences of EFL and ESL learners depending on their nationality and the exposure therein. The dichotomy between the traditional terms of EFL and ESL is used to research the syntactic, semantic, and lexical use of the preposition into in English as an L2 by Spanish-, French, Dutch-, and Tswana-speaking students. Gilquin and Granger used the *International Corpus of Learner English* in their study to find their results (2011:55-76). Their hypothesis was largely confirmed: the Dutch learners were the closest to the reference corpus, followed by the French, and finally the Spanish. However, the Tswana speakers both showed native-like English as well as weaker instances (Gilquin & Granger, 2011:75). Considering Netherlands being a country highly exposed to English, just like Sweden, we here presume Swedish speakers to be on the higher level of the dichotomy closer to an ESL rather than an EFL, which is why we can expect a higher level of grammar teaching.

### 3.1.2 Learning a second language

In research conducted by Källkvist and Peterson (2005), 14- and 17-year-old students learning a second language (L2), were asked to formulate a rule for subject-verb agreement after reading three grammatically correct sentences. Results showed that 41% of the 14-year-olds, and 31% of the 17-year-olds were able to construct an acceptable rule (Källkvist & Peterson, 2005:122). According to Källkvist and Peterson, an explanation to the low results could be that a: “[…]Swedish-speaking L2 user of English is not used to paying attention to subject-verb agreement since present-day Swedish uses the same verb form for all persons” (2005:117).

Moreover, Westergren, Axelsson & Hahn (2001) researched the progressive in their corpus based study. They mention that the use of the progressive often is considered hard for L2 learners, since the progressive has many subsidiary meanings. In addition, the Swedish language does not have an equivalent form to the progressive, which makes it more difficult to learn. In conclusion, their research established that Swedish learners use the progressive in a non-native way (Westergren Axelsson & Hahn, 2001:7, 25).

Tense errors linked to SLA have also been researched. The research presented below, has not been conducted on Swedish students, however, presents an important input on how English tenses are learned by L2 students. According to Collins’ article there is evidence in language acquisition research that “[…]learners of different L1 backgrounds face similar types of challenges” (Collins, 2007:295). In her study, Collins analyzed L1 influence in English verb tenses in written and oral
productions, and came to the conclusion that tense is a grammatical feature that is hard to master for L2 learners (ibid:301).

### 3.1.3 Attitudes towards grammar education

A Swedish study conducted by Brodow focuses on attitudes towards Swedish grammar (Brodow, Nilsson & Ullström, 2000). Brodow interviewed 32 people who work at high schools as teachers in Swedish. Even if his study is not specifically focused on English teachers, the aspect of attitude in relation to teaching grammar coincides with the aims of this study. Brodow asked the interview objects questions concerning how they valued grammar as term, their attitudes in relation to the significance of grammatical knowledge, how they motivated the advantages of knowing grammar to their students, as well as how the teachers register the attitude towards grammar amongst their own students, and from where they think these attitudes have emerged (ibid:72-132). What Brodow concluded in his study was that almost all of the teachers interviewed appreciated grammar, however, those teachers who wanted to tone down the significance of grammar were more experienced of the vocational programs (ibid:132-3). The teachers claimed that the hindrance to learn grammar is the terminology that comes with the subject area (ibid:105).

Brodow emphasizes the importance that teachers continuously educate themselves throughout their teaching careers, nonetheless, he found that teachers generally think that the grammar they have is enough, by the perception of grammar being fixed (ibid:133-4).

Another study that investigates the attitudes towards grammar in EFL-teaching has been conducted by Al-Mekhlafi (2011). He investigate the difficulties teachers in Oman face when teaching grammar to EFL-students, as well as those faced by students, in a teachers perspective. This study was conducted via a questionnaire. In his results, Al-Mekhlefi found that both teachers and students think that grammar instruction is difficult, thus students find it harder than teachers do. He also emphasizes that teaching methods of grammar instruction cannot simply be adopted universally, but rather that the grammar teaching has to be adapted to its learners (Al-Mekhlafi, 2011:69-92).

### 3.2 Theoretical perspectives

This paper requires several theoretical perspectives as we use two separate methods to seek different kinds of results. The various theoretical perspectives serve as the framing of the study.

#### 3.2.1 Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The essential theoretical perspective regarding both methods in this study is the study of Second Language Acquisition. Crucial to address in order to understand the theories regarding SLA, is the difference between an L1 and an L2. An L1 is the language that is acquired during early childhood, normally before the age of three, while L2 is a language that is acquired through informal and formal L2 learning. Informal learning takes place in naturalistic context, and formal learning in
classrooms (Saville-Troike, 2006:2). The study of SLA is rather new and entitled as “[t]he systematic study of how people acquire a second language (often referred to as an L2)[...]]” (Ellis, 1997:3). It was not until the late 1960s that scholars formulated systematic theories and models, to address the questions and main issues for SLA research: What exactly does the L2 learner come to know?; How does the learner acquire the knowledge?; and Why are some learners more successful than others? (Saville-Troike, 2006:2, 24). To be able to answer these questions, two major goals within SLA have been described. The first is description: “[...]giving a clear and accurate account of the learner’s competence”, and the second is explanation, involving the explanation of why errors are made and what is causing them (Ellis, 2008:36).

Moreover, SLA is multi-disciplinary, meaning that there are several different perspectives and methods of a range of disciplines (Ellis, 2005:3). Hence, this study will focus on SLA through a linguistic perspective with an internal focus, as this study targets linguistic competence and linguistic performance of L2 learners, as well as teaching methods and attitudes.

### 3.2.2 Internal focus and Universal Grammar

Within linguistic studies of SLA, there are two theoretical perspectives, external and internal. The external focus regards “[...]the information content of utterances, and in considering language primarily as a system of communication”, whereas an internal focus lay emphasis on internalized, underlying knowledge of language and is first and foremost based on the earlier work of Noam Chomsky (Saville-Troike, 2006:26). Chomsky addresses “[...]the necessity of assuming that children begin with an innate capacity which is biologically endowed”, and henceforth his theory has dominated most perspectives on linguistic SLA (ibid:25). In addition, Chomsky also declared the theory of Universal Grammar, which is the dominating approach within internal focus (ibid:46), and can be explained as: “[...]a set of general principles that apply to all languages rather than a set of particular rules” (Ellis, 1985:305). As mentioned above, Chomsky’s theories are of main focus within the internal perspective of SLA studies, concluding that internal focus derives from Universal Grammar (Ellis, 2008:557).

### 3.2.3 Interlanguage

When referring to SLA, internal focus and Universal Grammar a reference to interlanguage is vital, since they are all connected to this theory. The term interlanguage was coined by an American linguist, Larry Selinker, who defined interlanguage as: “[...]the fact that L2 learners construct a linguistic system that draws, in part, on the learner’s L1 but is also different from it and also from the target language” (Ellis, 1997:33). Hence, one can say that a learner’s interlanguage is a unique linguistic system (ibid:33). This theory serves as an account of how L2 acquisition takes place, but somewhat fails to offer a precise explanation of this. Instead, it serves as a theory that is of interest concerning the questions that it raises rather than what it answers. These questions are for example;
“Why do learners sometimes employ an L1 transfer strategy and sometimes an overgeneralization strategy?” (ibid:34).

3.2.4 Language development

When learning and developing a foreign language, three different phases can be reached: the initial phase, the second phase, and the final phase. In the initial phase, Universal Grammar is of the essence, due to the fact that the theory of a Universal Grammar concerns fundamental knowledge about language structure (Saville-Troike, 2006:18). The second phase, includes all stages of basic language development. Within the second phase, there is a complete agreement that “[…]L2 acquisition follows L1 acquisition[…]” (Saville-Troike, 2006:18). Hence, the second phase involves positive transfer, once a structure from L1 is used in L2, and the usage is correct within the L2; whilst negative transfer, is when an L1 structure or rule is used in L2, and the usage is considered an error (ibid:19). Negative transfer can result in avoidance, meaning that you avoid a specific type of construction within your L2, because the L1 does not contain a similar structure (Ellis, 1997:51). In addition, it can also result in overuse of other forms or generate the case of omission, for instance, leaving out words (ibid:52). Included is also the case of generalization, meaning that a student acquiring an L2 discovers a grammatical form that he or she think is easy and then overgeneralizes it, called overgeneralization, e.g. using the -ed suffix on irregular verbs (ibid:19). The final phase, which is the outcome of L2 learning, is individual. According to Ellis “[n]ot all learners reach the completion stage for every grammatical structure” (1997:29). This results in a final state that “[…]still includes instances of L1 interference or creative structures different from any that would be produced by a native speaker of the L2”, called fossilization which is a frozen state of progress where erroneous forms are kept (Saville-Troike, 2006:21).

Since this study focuses on junior high school students, it is fair to claim that they are all in the second phase of language development, meaning that many of the type of errors, defined and described above, are relevant for the errors analysis. Below, the theoretical perspective, specifically regarding the interviews of teachers, is described. However, as mentioned above, SLA is the foundation, which both of our methods revolve around.

3.2.5 Phenomenography

Seeing that people were objects of the interviews, questioned about their very personal perspective of their role as teacher, the phenomenographic perspective is agreeably applicable to present the data retrieved for this study. Thus, this theory needs to be described. The aim of the theory is to describe various people’s perceptions of a specific phenomenon, which essentially signify that what is investigated is the significance of something, in aberration of explanations, correlations, or frequencies (Larsson, 1986:13). The main focus is to draw parallels between people’s opinions and attitudes towards a specific phenomenon (such as grammar teaching), and how these take expression. For example in this study, the parallels are drawn between teachers’ perspectives on
their own teaching methods and attitudes in relation to the didactic process of teaching grammar and verb forms.

Attitudes and teaching methods can be categorized in various ways, however, every experience or perception is individual and henceforth arduous to generalize (Stensmo, 1994). In the pedagogical research area, these studies are usually assorted into three different groups: Didactical disciplinary studies, Pedagogically generic studies, and Studies of educational effects (Larsson, 1986:13). The third and fourth research questions of this study coincide with Pedagogically generic studies, since they put their attention to people's way to perceive generic phenomenons concerning education. Pedagogically generic studies concentrate on the understanding of teachers’ and learners’ actions, which are usually not well-reasoned, but plainly presuppositions (ibid:16).

3.2.6 Definitions

Important definitions are presented below, such as attitude, teaching method, teacher-centered approach and student-centered approach, the categorization of teaching aids, and finally, disturbing and destructive errors. First we have Attitude, which is a concept that generates a range of different definitions, which makes it relatively troublesome to define (Gardner, 1985:8). Nonetheless, it is a term commonly used in social sciences and social psychology (Dörnyei 1994:274). According to New Oxford American English Dictionary, attitude is defined as “a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person's behavior”. Thus, this is the definition that this study presupposes when using the term.

Besides the concept of attitude, teaching method is used. In accordance with the teacher web-site teach.com, teaching methods is defined as “strategies used for classroom instruction. Your choice of teaching method depends on what fits you — your educational philosophy, classroom demographic, subject area(s) and school mission statement” (teach.com). When it comes to the student’s stimulation of senses, the visual and the auditive here signify a traditional teacher-centered approach (Boström, 2004:181).

The teacher website teach.com divides teaching methods into the categories teacher-centered approach and student-centered approach. The teacher-centered approach is here defined as the teacher being the main authority figure, whose main purpose is to pass on knowledge and information to the students. The primary role of students is to passively receive information from the teacher, with the final goal of testing and assessments where their knowledge will be evaluated. Similarly, the teacher is an authority figure in the student-centered approach, however, the teacher and students both play an active role in the learning process. According to this model, the teacher’s main duty is to coach and facilitate the students' learning. The skills and knowledge of the students are measured both via formal and informal assessments (group projects, portfolios, class participation etc.). The students’ learning is assessed continuously throughout the education

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4 The appellations have been translated from Swedish to English
The informants’ approach towards a certain phenomenon will be categorized as teacher- or student-centered.

The use of teaching aids is also significant to teaching grammar. Nassaji and Fotos define the following theories: input-based, interaction- and output-based, and instructional context and focus on grammar (2011). Input-based focus on grammar deals with the information and knowledge that can be attained via our hearing and vision. Interaction- and output-based focus on grammar deals with the L2 used in productions, such as writing or speaking. Instructional context and focus on grammar emphasizes the importance of the role of context when learning grammar (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). These definitions are used to describe the teaching aids related to the teaching methods.

When speaking about grammatical errors, they can often be divided into two separate terms: disturbing and destructive errors. In this study, we presuppose disturbing errors to be mainly irritating, but do not hinder the understanding or flow of the text. A destructive error is when it hinders the understanding and natural flow of the text, and the reader must go back to figure out what the author actually means with the text. A destructive error is more severe than a disturbing error. The extent of destructive and disturbing errors may be complex and needs to be addressed. By looking at words only, spelling, contracted form, and the formation of irregular verbs are the only instances when verbs as words can be destructive. However, complete sentences can be more or less disturbing or destructive, for example, a sentence which contains verbs used in several tenses may be so confusing to the reader that he or she may not be able to read what the writer intended to say with the text. Also, a text that contains a bigger number of grammatical errors (even if the grammatical errors may be basic), as in Problematic cases section 6.10, it can be so destructive that it is impossible, or at least very difficult, for the reader to understand what the writer meant with his or her text.

In this section, the content necessary for our theoretical perspectives and definitions has been presented and explained. In the following section, the aims of our study and its research questions are presented.
4. Aim and research questions

This study is based on two separate methods: textual analysis and interviews. The purpose of these two methods is to investigate verb form errors by Swedish students in written productions of English texts, and teachers’ teaching methods and attitudes towards grammar teaching. More elaborately put, the textual analysis, which is a corpus-based study, aims to examine and analyze texts produced by Swedish students in English, and define verb form categories in which most errors occur. Incorporated is also a comparison between students in year seven and nine, in order to see if there is any difference in errors made when it comes to verb forms between the two. Besides analyzing texts for verb form errors, this study is also supplemented with an interview analysis, aiming to reveal teachers’ attitudes and perceptions of their own teaching method and grammar teaching.

The questions, which are the foundation of this study, are:

- What errors do Swedish junior high school students tend to make when it comes to verb forms in their written production, and which ones are more frequent?
- Is there a difference in verb form errors made between year seven and nine?
- Do the teachers’ attitudes toward grammar affect their teaching methods in grammar teaching, especially regarding verb forms?
- What verb form errors do teachers think that their students generally have difficulties with?
5. Methods

In this section, the scientific methods for this paper are described. Strategically, the methods used are of both a qualitative and quantitative character. To the former belongs the results from qualitative interviews, and to the latter the results of a quantitative textual analysis. The main purpose of these kinds of scientific studies is to produce results that can be considered as valid and solid via empirical methods. As researchers, it is momentous to establish studies on reliable methods to ensure that what is analyzed is coherent with what the research aims to prove.

5.1 Quantitative textual analysis

The method chosen to execute the textual analysis is Error Analysis (EA), which is “[…]a tool for investigating how learners acquire a second language (L2)” (Ellis, 2008:45). This method is based on Corder’s (1967) statement that errors provide a researcher with evidence of how a language has been learned (in Ellis, 2008:45).

The chosen essays serve as the foundation to the research questions since both years contribute to answer: What errors do Swedish junior high school students tend to make when it comes to verb forms in their written production, and which are more frequent? As well as the question: Is there a difference in verb form errors made between year seven and nine? Presented below is a series of sections giving an explanation to how the textual analysis has been conducted.

5.1.1 Ethical concerns

The primary material used, originates from The Uppsala Learner English Corpus (ULEC), which consists of essays collected by others than me. The essays are anonymous and the only information given is: date of composition, register, year in school, level of English course in senior high school, type of program, gender, and age (Johansson & Geisler, 2008:181).

5.1.2 Selection of texts

As mentioned above the primary material used originates from ULEC, which is “[…]a collection of essays by Swedish junior and senior high school students aged between 14 and 19” (Johansson & Geisler, 2008:181). Originating from this corpus, a material of 30 essays written by students in year seven and 30 essays written by students in year nine was chosen. When it came to the selection of texts we reasoned that junior high school students would produce more errors than senior high school students, giving us a bigger variety of number of errors to analyze. We also expected that the errors found could be considered errors and not mistakes due to the level of education. Moreover, the texts were selected based on the person that collected them, in order to presuppose that the same instructions were given to both year seven and nine. To reach the even amount of 30 the first texts presented of the person who collected the texts were selected. All texts were
chosen within the same title “Do you believe in ghosts?”, however, gender, date of composition, or similar were not considered, but merely the level of education within junior high school.

5.1.3 Method for analysis

The method used for the textual analysis is Error Analysis (EA), described in Analysing Learner Language (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). However, important to mention is that not all steps in Error Analysis have been included. Some adaptations have been made in order to form a more suitable model for this study. According to Corder (in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005:57) the steps in conducting an Error Analysis are:

1. Collection of a sample of learner language
2. Identification of errors
3. Description of errors
4. Explanation of errors
5. Error evaluation

Firstly, the selection and collection of texts are explained in the section above.

Secondly, the identification of errors is central. In order to identify errors, one must create a “[…]reconstruction of the sample as this would have been produced by the learner’s native speaker counterpart” (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005:58). However, this has not been done in this study. Instead, all of the verb forms in the essays were underlined, following extensive and intensive reading of the essays, in order to extract all the errors made. When cases of uncertainty have occurred I have asked my tutor and my co-writer for assistance.

Moreover, in order to analyze an error, an error must be defined. The errors analyzed in this study are based on Lennon’s (1991) definition in Ellis and Barkhuizen: “A linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context […] would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers’ native speakers counterparts” (2005:56). However, apparent spelling errors such as was instead of was have not been included. In addition, a distinction between errors and mistakes is according to Corder (1974) useful (in Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005:62). According to Ellis, errors are gaps in learners’ L2 knowledge, whereas mistakes are done “[…]because of the difficulty of processing forms that are not yet fully mastered” (1997:17). However, in this study, no distinction is made regarding errors and mistakes, instead, all will be classified as errors. There is also a distinction between overt and covert errors that Ellis and Barkhuizen mention: “[a]n error is said to be overt if it can be detected by inspecting the error. An error is said to be covert if it only becomes apparent when a larger stretch of the discourse is considered” (2005:56). In this study, both overt and covert errors have been included.

Thirdly, descriptions of the errors were made, and Ellis recommends a classification of errors into grammatical categories (1997:18). Since this study only includes verb form errors, the
categories have been formed based on the errors found. In addition to the categories, a general categorization between different types of errors, regarding the different verb form categories, were also made. When categorizing, the errors were submitted into tables, including frequency and percentage of the total numbers of errors, as well as frequency and percentage of the numbers of essays including an error, see Tables 2 and 3. This was done in order to see which verb forms caused most errors amongst the students. Moreover, in the section presenting the results, the examples of errors provided include information about sex, age, school form, and school year. This information is given in order of correctness when presenting results from a corpus.

When describing the errors, a general rule mentioned in Ellis and Barkhuizen is used. If a sentence is written in present tense, when it should have been past tense, it should be classified under past tense (2005:60-1). This is adopted in all categories except one, the progressive, since it is overused by Swedish students learning English, according to Estling Vannestål (2007:197). Therefore, I have chosen to present all errors regarding the progressive in one category, in order to see if what Estling Vanneståhl claims corresponds to the results within this study.

After describing the errors, an explanation of the errors is provided, in section 7, by using concepts such as omission, transfer, and overgeneralization etc. Finally, an error evaluation is made where errors are considered as more serious than others, and are categorized as disturbing and destructive errors, see section 3.2.6 for an explanation. As mentioned above, not all steps concerning Error Analysis have been done in this study, and one step concerning error evaluation has been omitted. This step concerns the selection of two judges to look at one’s work in order to increase the reliability of the results (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005:67).

The four steps explained above are recited in two of the sections below. Step two, identification, and three, description, are presented in the results, section 6, while step four, explanation, and five, evaluation, are presented in the analysis, section 7. In the results section, focus is on the errors in general, therefore, there is no categorization between year seven and year nine. However, in the analysis a normalization⁵ is made, which shows the amount of errors per one thousand words, making it possible to compare the errors made in year seven and nine.

In this study it is only errors in verb phrases that have methodologically been examined. When analyzing the student texts a decision was made to also include spelling errors within the verb phrase since these were frequently found. Important to clarify is that the errors we consider as spelling errors only regard misspellings of verbs. One can discuss whether or not all errors are spelling errors, however, in this study a line has been drawn to clarify the difference between a spelling error and a grammatical error. A misspelling of a verb only includes a single word, and does not include any other errors. A structural and grammatical error is where the structure and grammar of what is written is incorrect. To clarify, an error made regarding contracted form is classified as a auxiliary error, since it is not a single word but two words contracted into one, and therefore it is

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⁵ Errors/amount of words*1,000
seen as a structural and grammatical error. Important to state is that only errors have been examined in this study and the amount of correct instances contrary the amount of errors have not been analysed.

Within the results and analysis sections, books such as *A Student’s Grammar of the English Language* (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990), *University Grammar of English with a Swedish Perspective* (Estling Vannestähl, 1997), *Learner English* (Swan & Smith, 2001) and *Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002) are used, since these books contribute to essential knowledge when describing and analyzing errors. Included is also the previous research presented above in section 3.1.

### 5.2 Qualitative interview

In a qualitative method, the question is *what* is being investigated. Since this study is empirically looking at how something is experienced, and not necessarily how something actually is, the results can neither be regarded as absolutely true or false. It is empirical since it attempts to analyze and describe what a number of people have said in an interview (Larsson, 1986:12-3). The prospect of using a qualitative method is to find qualitative divergence in account of *several* people being interviewed (ibid:20). The interviews serve as the foundation to answer our third and fourth research question formulated. Below, sections provide a more informative view of the aspects and considerations taken into account when conducting this study, as regards the interview method.

#### 5.2.1 Ethical concerns

When conducting studies that include human beings, some ethical concerns need to be taken into consideration. No individual in Sweden is allowed humiliation, infringement, or to be wronged (Swedish Research Council, 2002:5). These regulations are cumulated under the requirement of the protection of the individual self, which implicates four requirements: information, consensuality, confidentiality, and utilization (ibid:6). These requirements are of utter importance, thus have been in mind when collecting data and conducting the study.

Teachers participating in this interview were contacted via e-mail, containing information about the purpose of contacting them, the aim of the study, the focus of the interviews, approximate time for the interviews, which university we are placed at, and contact information.

This coincides with the requirement of information (ibid:7-8). The Scientific Research Council emphasizes the importance to consider the knowledge and data collected in relation to any risks the informants could be exposed to (ibid:5). Since the informants are questioned about certain values and attitudes, we wanted to avoid the risk of them feeling exposed, both personally and professionally, hence the contract form was a necessity to ensure security of the informants. The

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6 The appellations have been translated from Swedish to English
informants were informed and ensured that information such as their names, contact information, or workplace were not to be exposed, but information such as age, time of working as a teacher, and subjects they are qualified for teaching might be used. Even if certain information about them is not exposed in this study, it is also critical linguistically not to expose them in manners that could be interpreted as deictically or judgmentally, to show respect for their participation, integrity, and profession. This has been in consideration according to the requirement of confidentiality (ibid:12-3). The contract form also included stipulations that the informants agreed to if signing, such taking the right to use the information given and transcribing their interviews. By signing this contract form, they agreed to give us the right to use the information for our study solely, which is in congruity with both the requirement of consensuality and the requirement of utilization (ibid: 9-11, 14-5).

5.2.2 Selection of interview objects

The objects used for the interviews are teachers who work at junior high schools in Sweden. It was of utmost significance to have teachers who work in junior high schools, and not senior high school or middle school teachers, rationalized because of the textual analysis being based on junior high school student texts from ULEC. One of the teachers who was interviewed only taught year seven in junior high school, otherwise she taught younger students in middle school. Nevertheless, her teaching method and attitude are remarkable since her participation offers a valuable insight to the early years of high school.

The arranged meetings were situated in schools located in suburbs of the northern Stockholm area, more specifically Täby and Vallentuna. Nonetheless, the demographic location has not been taken into consideration in this study, thus, the selection had more to do with the convenience of the location and personal contacts with teachers within the schools. Aside from the teachers I already had contact with from earlier on, the request for other teachers to interview was made via emails to the principal or administrative staff. It is worth mentioning that the principals or administrative staffs selection of an interview object may be affected by the teachers interest and knowledge within grammar. The choice of schools was also limited, due to the short time period this study had to be written in.

Because of the narrow time frame for the study to be conducted in, the decision was made to interview five different teachers. We reasoned that including five teachers for this study would be enough to get valid results. However, the number of five informants is not large-scaled enough to recognize their behavior or attitudes as general knowledge.

All five informants are female of various ages.7 Two of the teachers work in the same school and rather closely with each other. The remaining interview objects were found in other schools.

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7 Since all informants in the interviews are female, all pronouns used regarding the interview method are henceforth female, eg. she, her.
Because of the promise not to use the informants’ names, the interview objects have been numbered from 1-5, in the order that they were interviewed in. Information that could be of interest or add perspectives to the analysis is the informants’ ages, years as professional teachers, what subjects they are qualified to teach, and finally, how many years of teaching experience they had.

Table 1. Information about the teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Interview object 1</th>
<th>Interview object 2</th>
<th>Interview object 3</th>
<th>Interview object 4</th>
<th>Interview object 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as professional teacher</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualified in subjects</td>
<td>English &amp; German</td>
<td>English, Swedish &amp; Biology (Maths, Arts, Music year 1-3)</td>
<td>English &amp; Maths</td>
<td>English &amp; Swedish</td>
<td>English &amp; Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach year</td>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>4-7</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>6-9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2.3 Method for collecting data

The choice of using a qualitative interview as a method is to enable the emotions and ideas of the informants to be expressed (Esaiasson et al:189, 285-6) in relation to their own teaching methods, grammar, and more specifically, verb forms. By using interviews as a method, it is more likely to capture the informants’ first instinctive response. That is why you can expect the answers of a qualitative interview to be fairly candid (ibid:259-60).

When collecting data at the interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was used. The choice of making the interview semi-structured had mainly to do with the time aspect and efficiency. It was of great importance to get as much information as possible, without governing the interview too much (Esaiasson et al., 2007:298; Lantz, 2007:33,73). To ensure the efficiency of the interviews, the guide was structured with three main themes: the first to give a more general image of the teachers’ perception of their subject area, the second to focus on grammar and teaching grammar in general, and the third aims to give a more specific idea of their attitudes and teaching method in relation to teaching verb forms more specifically. The questions in the interview guide address the aims for this study. The time for the interviews was approximately 30 minutes long.

The positive aspects of using a semi-structured interview guide are that the questions demand developed and detailed answers, and not simply yes- or no-answers. The informants can speak quite freely, but the interviewer can still supervise the dialogue in a certain fashion.
While conducting these interviews, they were all spoken in Swedish. Even if this study is composed in English, speaking in Swedish enabled the informants to express themselves as unconfined as possible, without risking that language would become an impediment. However, since this study is written in English, all interviews have been translated from Swedish into English.

Alongside the interview guide as a tool to collect data, audio recorders were used. There are many benefits using audio recorders. Firstly, the advantage of not having to take notes is important. Taking notes can be very distracting for the informant, and may create a distance between the interviewer and the one being interviewed. Secondly, the audio recording is also an excellent tool when transcribing the interviews, being able to note exactly what the informant says. To avoid any technical issues, audio recordings were made onto two different units.

5.2.4 Method for analysis

After conducting all interviews, the process of compilation of the data was made. To get a vivid and lucid overview of what the informants had said, all audio recordings were first listened to. Further, the interviews were transcribed from the audio recorder into writing as meticulously as possible. Laughs, sighs, and different tones of voice, were transcribed since it can empower the image and attitudes of the informants. However, the transcriptions have in retrospect been processed after conventional reading structures. Because of the volume of all transcriptions, the content of what had been said was narrowed down into a compilation of tables for each sub-theme and question. Next, the compilations were submitted into another table to get a better view of the similarities and differences of the informants’ allocations. This reduction of the data, in which you carefully choose what information is significant or not for the questions of this study, is important for the qualitative analysis (Lantz, 2007:105-7).

To be able to answer the questions for this study, the results of the interviews had to be put into the light of the theoretical framework, phenomenography. By categorizing the answers in relation to a certain phenomena, the analysis would become more structured and comprehensible. This method of categorizing and charting the answers is what Esaiasson calls the Charting Method (2007:307), which essentially means that all relative phenomena are charted, in our case that means teachers’ attitudes and teaching methods. Differences and similarities of the informants’ answers were also of interest, to investigate whether any patterns could be distinguished. The method is called Entity Method (ibid:307).
6. Results: Textual Analysis

As mentioned above, a total of 60 essays, whereas 30 essays from year seven and 30 essays from year nine, are analyzed based on Error Analysis as a method. However, the results presented below only concern the total amount of verb form errors within the verb phrase made within the 60 selected essays. No comparison between the two year groups is made here. The comparison is presented in section 7.

Moreover, the selected essays vary in length: the shortest contains 31 words and the longest 514. However, the average length is 217 words for year seven, and 213 words for year nine. Altogether, a corpus consisting of 12,906 words; 6,513 words in year seven; and 6,393 words in year nine, was analyzed. The total number of errors concerning verb forms are 738. Below, results of the error analysis concerning identification and description are presented in categories and subcategories. In each of the categories presented below, different types of errors have been spotted, however, because of the extent of this study, not all errors are presented and exemplified. Instead, focus is on the most common errors.

Regarding the categories, a clarification must be made. One category called Mixed bag, includes verb form errors that could not be inserted in any of the other categories, but are still regarded as verb form errors and are counted as a part of the total amount of errors. Another category is Problematic cases where errors that were impossible to analyze are presented. This category is presented in order to inform the readers that there are a few sentences that were impossible to analyze due to the severeness and amount of the errors within a sentence.

Below, Table 2 and 3 are presented. Table 2 shows which categories contain most of the errors, presented in both numbers and percentage. The total frequencies of errors made in each category are also presented in a manner so that a transparent presentation of the results can be provided. Included are all 60 essays. Table 3 shows the amount of essays that contain a certain error corresponding to a category. In that way, the results of how many students produced a certain verb form error are presented. Shown is also the amount of essays containing an error in percent.

Table 2. Amount of errors and errors in %

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The percentage of the errors are rounded figures
Spelling holds the highest amount of errors with a total of 233 errors represented in 78% of all 60 essays. The amount of misspellings derives from the fact that the word *believe*, which is present in the headline of the analyzed essays “Do you believe in ghosts”, is misspelled 111 times.

The second most common error made is the misspelling of words containing a *-ed* suffix, (27 errors), which is used to form the past participle or the past tense, where the most prominent error is the exclusion of *e* or the usage of an *i* instead of an *e* in the *-ed* suffix. Most of these errors involve

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**Table 3. Essays containing errors and essays containing errors in % (60 essays)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Essays with errors</th>
<th>% of errors in 60 essays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spelling in verb phrase</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliaries</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-verb agreement</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular verbs</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The past tense</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The present tense</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The progressive</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The present perfect</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The past perfect</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed bag</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The future</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The infinitive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conditional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>738</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

6.1 Spelling

Spelling holds the highest amount of errors with a total of 233 errors represented in 78% of all 60 essays. The amount of misspellings derives from the fact that the word *believe*, which is present in the headline of the analyzed essays “Do you believe in ghosts”, is misspelled 111 times.

The second most common error made is the misspelling of words containing a *-ed* suffix, (27 errors), which is used to form the past participle or the past tense, where the most prominent error is the exclusion of *e* or the usage of an *i* instead of an *e* in the *-ed* suffix. Most of these errors involve
the word *happened* with a total of 23 errors, see examples (1) and (2), however, included are also words such as *opened, walked, and screamed.*

(1). […]we had the television on *it happened* the same thing like with music.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(2). My friends telling me stories or something that *happenid* them.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)

Moreover, words such as *gonna* and *wanna* (9 errors) are marked as errors since it is colloquial language, see example (3). This type of error is also categorized in the future category and in the infinitive category but is only exemplified in this category. Lastly, errors concerning the misspelling of the verbs *were* and *where* are rather few covering only three errors, example (4). Errors which occur but are rare with few instances, are not exemplified, for instance, misspellings of *scream, explain, disappear, and falling.*

(3). It is so many questions that people *wanna* know about ghosts[…]
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(4). But I think that deth people can see us from *were* they are[…]
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)

### 6.2 Auxiliaries

The second category is auxiliaries with a total of 145 errors represented in 67% of the essays. The highest amount of errors concerns the usage of contractions. As many as 99 errors regard the apostrophe being omitted completely, example (5), or placed erroneously, example (6). In addition, some of the errors regarding contractions altered the meaning of the word. This mostly affects the words, *its - it’s,* (10 errors), see example (7), whereas only one error regards the words *your - you’re.*

(5). I *dont* know if I have se a ghost so i *dont* believe in them so much.
(male student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(6). I don’t know how some people can thinkt that ghost *are’n’t* real?*
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)
(7). […]because it is exating and frighening that makes peopel think *its* fun.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)

Apart from the contraction errors, there are twelve errors concerning the lack of an auxiliary verb, marked with the symbol Ø, as in example (8). Moreover, five errors concern an erroneous usage of the auxiliary *do,* which is used “[…]to form negation[…]and questions with main verbs” (Estling Vanneståhl, 2007:157). In example (9), a do-construction should not have been used,
instead, the student should have written: “who believes in ghosts”. According to Estling Vannestål, the of overuse of the do-construction is quite common in affirmative clauses (2007:158). Moreover, example (10) shows where the student has mixed up two types of do-constructions.

(8). some humans belive only things that they [...]
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)
(9). When i talk to someone who do believe in ghosts i just laugh about it.
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)
(10). In short we want to find out if it does, or do not exist.
(male student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

6.3 Subject-verb agreement

A total of 140 errors found in 87% out of the essays, places subject-verb agreement at number three out of 14 categories. According to Student grammar of Spoken and Written English “[t]he rule of subject-verb concord is that in finite clauses, the verb phrase in a clause agrees with the subject in terms of numbers[…]and person[…]” (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002:232). However, this is something that is proven difficult for the students to grasp. In the student examples displayed below the corresponding subjects are underlined and the verbs are in italics. If a student has left out a subject or a verb, it is marked with the following symbol 🟤.

Firstly, the students made 30 errors relating to a personal pronoun, functioning as either a subject or an object in the sentences, as in example (11). Moreover, two errors concern the exclusion of a personal pronoun, as in example (12). With reference to the examples, one can assume that the most common subjects represented in the essays are personal pronouns, hence the number of errors made. Also, twenty errors are found where no verb was present, see example (13). Moreover, a considerable amount of errors (25 errors) illustrates an incorrect usage of the third person singular -s, see examples (14) and (15).

(11). I said you was screaming so that’s why I woke you up.
(male student, aged 16, junior high school, year 9)
(12). […]always when I see a scary movey or a tv serie about vampires 🟤 get scared[…] 
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(13). And sometimes when the doors open it selfs it feels like you 🟤 not alone.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(14). I feels like I get amnesia, it is like memory lost.
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)
(15). […] like a door open and nobody has really open it. (17)
(male student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)
Furthermore, the students revealed a problem connected to the word ghost (14 errors). It seems as if the overall issue concerning ghost is whether or not it is addressed as a plural ghosts or singular ghost. Therefore, errors were made concerning the agreeing verb, is or are, as in example (16).

Lastly, the students demonstrate a difficulty with the existential there. Where there is used with an extraposed subject, the verb should agree with the following noun. In the 60 student essays analyzed, ten errors were found, see examples (17) and (18).

(16). I don’t think that ghosts is real.
(male student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)
(17). When it comes to aliens, I think that there are life on other planets.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(18). And there is alot of scientists[…].
(female student, aged 14, junior high school, year 7)

6.4 Irregular verbs

In this category, the amount of errors made (61 errors), in 48% of the essays, places irregular verb as category number four.

The most common error is the usage of the wrong form of an irregular verb, for example, eat instead of ate, or vice versa, which marks it as a tense error. Due to this, these errors are presented and exemplified in the categories past and present tense, in section 6.5.

In the second place, with seven errors, is the incorrect choice of a verb. Dominating is the usage of the irregular verb be, used instead of the irregular verbs: become, became, become, see examples (19) and (20). However, important to note is that this type of error is made four times by one student, leaving a rather small percentage of errors left constructed by other students.

(19). I think when you die you get a soul, but if you are a bad person you be a ghost.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(20). I also think sometimes that if you die in a sickness youd be a good ghost.
(female student, aged 14, junior high school, year 7)

Moreover, errors concerning overgeneralization are made, see examples (21) and (22). In these examples, the students extended the rule for the –ed suffix used with regular verbs to express past tense and past participle, which is not possible for irregular verbs (Estling Vannestål, 2007:208). In four other cases, it is the spelling of the irregular verb that caused a problem, see example (23).

(21). When the door opened a really strong and cold wind blewed at him[…]
(female student, aged 14, junior high school, year 7)
(22). We got really scared and runed downstairs.
6.5 Tense

The total amount of errors made concerning both the past and the present tense is 86, where most of these concern the past tense. This amount of errors puts the past at number five and the present at number six of the 14 categories. If a student used the present tense where he or she should have used the past tense, the error will be presented in the section with the past tense and vice versa.

6.5.1 The past tense

A total of 50 errors were made when students tried to use the past tense, and 25% of the essays contain an error. The most common errors made (23 errors) regards the issue of distinguishing the present from the past when using regular verbs, see examples (24) and (25). The usage of the present instead of the past was made by only eight students.

(24). And he took down the magazine and the speakloader had turn around again!
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)
(25). One of my friends show me a very very scary clip[…]
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

Moreover, 22 errors concern irregular verbs used in the wrong tense, see examples (26) and (27). As mentioned in section 6.4, irregular verbs caused many tense errors, and by choosing the wrong irregular verb they created an erroneous sentence, using the present tense when it should have been the past tense. The other remaining errors (5 errors), concern the usage of the progressive instead of the past tense, and are presented in the progressive section (see 6.6), since all progressive errors have been grouped together.

(26). I can tell a story that my dads friend tell me.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(27). When he come home from the school one day[…]
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

6.5.2 The present tense

Regarding the present, a total of 36 errors are made, in 38% of the essays, showing that more students made errors concerning the present tense than the past, even if the amount of errors made is higher within the past tense category.
As mentioned above, the students prove to have a problem with distinguishing the two tenses. The usage of the past tense when it should have been the present tense, regarding regular verbs, concerns 16 errors, example (28). However, in contrast to the past tense, holding 22 errors concerning irregular verbs, the present tense only holds 8 errors concerning the usage of the wrong irregular verbs, as in example (29). Moreover, the word happen is the reason to six errors, see example (30).

(28). [...] but now I believed.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)

(29). I also believe in guardian angels, and they talk with us and told us what we should do[...]
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

(30). People also get fascinated if something strange happen to them[...]
(male student, aged 16, junior high school, year 9)

6.6 The progressive

The amount of errors made (25 errors) places the progressive as number seven in order of categories containing errors, and 28% of the students’ essays included an error with the progressive.

As mentioned in section 5.1.3, two different kinds of errors concerning the progressive are presented in this category. Firstly, classified as an error is when the students have not used it, and secondly, is when the students have used it but should instead have chosen the past or the present tense. The presentation of the two types of errors is done since the progressive often is overused by learners of English according to Estling Vannestål (2007:197).

Furthermore, the progressive is a category that is rather difficult to classify errors in. Biber, Conrad & Leech (2013) mention that “[i]t is sometimes assumed that the progressive aspect occurs only with dynamic verbs that describe activities. However, the progressive is also used with verbs that describe a situation or state” (Biber et al., 2013:163). Estling Vannestål states that the usage of stative verbs in the progressive form is gaining ground in present-day English (2007:193). This makes it difficult to mark a sentence in the progressive as either wrong or right. However, I presuppose the errors that do not adhere to the basic rules of the progressive covered by Greenbaum & Quirk, (1990:53-7).

As mentioned above, there are examples of errors (10 errors) where the students should have used the progressive instead of the form of verb that they have chosen, as in example (31). Moreover, there are errors where the students used the progressive (15 errors) where the present or the past is more appropriate, which is commonly known as overuse of the progressive, see examples (32) and (33).

(31). Then it could feels like someone stands behind me[...]
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(32). [...]I’m *watching* scary bloody movies with ghosts sometimes[...]  
(female student, aged 14, junior high school, year 9)  
(33). When he said that the music *getting* higher.  
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)  

6.7 Word order

Both Swedish and English derive from the Germanic branch, meaning that they have many grammatical principles that are similar (Estling Vannestål, 2007:39; Swan & Smith, 2001:21). For instance “[t]he basic word order of English is subject-verb-object (SVO)[... ]” (Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002:398) which is equivalent to Swedish, in most cases. However, a total of 12 errors are made concerning word order, and 15% of the essays included a word order error. Most of the errors made (11 errors), regard L1 transfer i.e. the students used a Swedish word order that is erroneous in English. Two examples concern the usage of Swedish sentence structure transferred to English, which creates an erroneous sentence: “*Men för mig är det stort*”, compare, example (34), and “*Ibland kan du se något när du utomhus*”, compare, example (35).

(34). But for me *is it* big.  
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)  
(35). Sometimes *can you see* something when you outside[...]  
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)  

6.8 Other verb forms

Within this category, errors are divided in subcategories of: The present perfect, the past perfect, the infinitive, the future, and the conditional. These categories hold a total of 29 errors, divided quite equally between them.

6.8.1 The present perfect

Only eight present perfect errors in 13% of the essays are made by the students. Most common (3 errors) is the usage of *have* + the base form of the verb, as in example (36). In addition, two errors concern the usage of the present perfect, where they should have used the past tense, see example (37), and in example (38) the student should have omitted *have*.

(36). [...]so i *have* my room *clean* every night.  
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)  
(37). [...] *[here job is behind an old mental hospital that have shuted down].*  
(male student, aged 16, junior high school, year 9)  
(38). Once in my life *i have* really got scared[...]


6.8.2 The past perfect

Only seven past perfect errors (5% of the essays) were made. Four of these concern the usage of *had* and the base form of the verb. Two of these concern the word *happen*, and the other two the words *turn* and *move*, examples (39) and (40). One error regards the usage of the present perfect instead of the past perfect, see example (41), where the student also forgot the *-ed* participle.

(39). Because if this thing *had not happen* to me[…]
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(40). And he took down the magazin and the speakloader *had turn* around again!
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)
(41). […]but I *have close* off the sound from the tv so it was a kind of creepy.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)

6.8.3 The future

A total of six errors are made concerning the future, in 8% of the students’ essays. Included is also the use of *gonna*, regarded as an error, since it is colloquial language. This type of error was discussed together with *wanna* in the spelling category.

One error concerns a student using the future when she in fact should have used the past tense, see example (42). Another example consists of a student mistaken the word *will* for the Swedish word *vill*, and by doing so presents a sentence that is erroneous. Compare with the Swedish translation “[…]*du kanske vill ha ett spöke hemma*”, see example (43).

(42).I’ve seen many movies about ghosts and *i’ll* have been very scared.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(43). […]that is not lucky you maybe *will* have ghost at home.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)

6.8.4 The infinitive

The infinitive is another category, with a total of five errors made by 8% of the essays. Two errors concern the use of *wanna* in place of *want to*, which is a use of colloquial language that is classified as erroneous, but is presented and exemplified in the category of spelling. Another error is the omission of *to* within the infinitive where it is not possible. However, important to clarify is that the infinitive can be created both with or without *to*, but in example (44) the word *to* can not be omitted which creates a erroneous sentence (Estling Vannestål, 2007:151). In addition, one student forgot to insert *to*, which creates an erroneous sentence, as in example (44). Lastly, other errors occur, but since these errors are all diverse only one is exemplified in this category.
(44). [...]if strange things happen, I start ▲ wonder.
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

6.8.5 The conditional

The final category, containing the least errors, three errors in 5% of the essays, concerns conditional clauses. Estling Vannestål mentions several reasons why Swedish learners have problems with the conditional, for example, it does not come natural for Swedish learners to insert the word would, which results in a negative transfer (2007:189-90). Meaning that the conditional is difficult for Swedish learners.

The three errors found are of various kinds. In example (45), the student forgot to insert would between you and believe, and has also added -ed participle to believe, which is incorrect. Example (46), shows a similar error regarding the first conditional where the student forgot would. Moreover, an error made concerns the fact that would should not occur in the if-clause, see example (47) (Estling Vannestål, 2007:188-9).

(45). [...]but if something like that happen to you I think you ▲ believed in ghosts[...]
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(46). But I think if you come to hell maybe, maybe not you met a ghost???
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(47). [...]if it would have been proved that they really exist.
(female student, aged 15, junior high school, year 9)

6.9 Mixed Bag

In this category, seven errors of various kinds are found in 12% of the essays. These errors did not correspond to the categories above, however, they are still considered as errors. Some of the errors concern the usage of a verb, where an adverb or adjective would have been the correct usage, as in example (48). The example provided illustrates the usage of the verb fascinated instead of fascination. Other errors sorted in this category concern the usage of an erroneous construction of words, example (49).

(48). The fascinated about the unknowing?
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
(49). Some people are just trying to find up information about ghost[...]
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
6.10 Problematic cases

Problematic cases consist of five erroneous sentences produced by students that are difficult to analyze due to their construction. Hence, these cases are only acknowledged, and are not counted into the total amount of errors. Below, two of these sentences are presented, see examples (50) and (51).

(50). Well I believe in paranormal things but it can change with different places.
(female student, aged 14, junior high school, year 9)

(51). [...] if it doesn't happen something like that to you, you don't believe in and things like that but if something like that happen to you I think you believed in ghost and everything like that.
(female student, aged 13, junior high school, year 7)
7. Analysis: Textual analysis

Above, the results regarding the total amount of verb form errors concerning both year seven and nine are presented. In this section, errors made in year seven are contrasted against errors made in year nine, by using a normalization method\(^9\), enabling a comparison, since the two year groups differ in the amount of words written. In addition, the analysis below, also includes explanations and evaluations of the errors connected to SLA, Internal focus, Universal Grammar, Interlanguage, and Language development presented in section 3.2, however not all type of errors will be explained due to the extent of this study.

The error analysis shows that some English verb forms are harder to acquire than others. Since this study focuses on SLA through a linguistic perspective with an internal focus, it aims to explain why errors are made connected to Universal Grammar and Interlanguage as all explanations below are based on these theories. Universal Grammar merely states that the students were able to produce these texts in their L2 because of their Universal Grammar. The errors the students produce illustrate students’ interlanguage, that is a unique linguistic system between the learner’s L1 and L2.

Most errors are represented in the category of spelling. Regarding this category year nine made more errors than year seven, with 18.9 errors per 1,000 words, contra 17.2 errors in year seven. Mentioned in section 6.1, a common misspelling, apart from the word believe, concerns words with an -ed suffix, see example (2). An explanation to this type of error could be that the -ed form can be pronounced as /id/, /d/ or /t/, and this is why the students have mistaken the spelling of the word happened because of how it is pronounced (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990:27). In conclusion, most spelling errors are disturbing, and do not affect the overall readability of the text.

Second in place are errors concerning auxiliaries, where year nine has slightly more errors per 1,000 words (11.6) than year seven (10.9). As shown in section 6.2, most of the errors concern contractions, see example (6). This type of error could be explained by the fact that apostrophes are not used in the same way in Swedish as in English. This could lead to confusion, especially when there is a minimal contrast (ones/one’s; its/it’s) (Swan & Smith, 2001:26). Almost all of these errors are of a disturbing kind, however, some are destructive, for example, where the word has changed meaning due to the omission of an apostrophe. Despite the number of errors made, it is hard to explain why many of the errors are made, and why year nine made more errors than year seven.

Thirdly, the subject-verb agreement category is quite prominent, with errors found in 52 out of 60 essays. This means that only eight students participating evaded a subject-verb agreement error. Concerning the subject-verb agreement, year seven (12.7) made more errors per thousand words than year nine (8.9). An explanation to the errors might correspond to the fact that Swedish has no

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\(^9\) Errors/Words*1,000
inflection for person or number (Swan & Smith, 2001:30). However, some of the errors made regarding the simple construction confirm that many might not understand the rules of subject-verb agreement, which is surprising since English is taught from year four, see example (11), section 6.3. As presented in previous research, section 3.1, Källkvist and Peterson concluded that subject-verb agreement is among the four most frequently made grammatical errors in writing, which corroborates with the results in this study (2005:112). However, Källkvist and Peterson also conclude that 17-year-olds were worse than 14-year-olds at stating a simple rule for subject-verb agreement (2005:128). In addition, errors concerning existential there could be explained by the fact that the students did not know that there is used with an extraposed subject, and therefore did not know that the verb should agree with the following noun, see section 6.3, example (17). The errors made concerning present tense -s, in section 6.3, example (14), are according to Estling Vannestål a typical problem for people learning English, which corroborates with this study (2007:39). Moreover, most of the subject-verb agreement errors can be defined as disturbing errors since the meaning is understood despite the errors.

As number four is the erroneous usage of irregular verbs, which has caused errors largely connected to several categories, such as the past and the present tense. The errors made are of a substantial amount, 5.4 per 1,000 words in year seven and 4.1 in year nine, showing a better result in year nine than in year seven. Some of the errors concern overgeneralization, as the students have used the -ed suffix on irregular verbs, see example (21) in section 6.4, which can be caused by negative transfer from their L1, Swedish (Ellis, 1997:19).

Moreover, some errors concerning the present and the past tense, which come in fifth and sixth place, are due to the usage of erroneous irregular and regular verbs. Most tense errors, excluding irregular verbs, see section 6.5.1, example (24), are hard to find a reasonable explanation to, since “[…]most of the time the expression of time in verb phrases is similar in English and Swedish[…]” (Estling Vannestål, 2007:190). The total amount of errors made within the present and the past tense shows that year nine (2,5) is better at handling the present tense than year seven (3.1), and that year seven (3,5) is better than year nine (4,2) at correctly expressing the past tense. As mentioned in section 3.2.1, previous research, Collins states that tense is a challenging feature to master, which evidently also is the case for the students analyzed in this study (2007:302). The amount of errors concerning tense causes both disturbing and destructive errors. Most of the errors are disturbing when reading one sentence at a time, however, when reading an entire essay, the errors become destructive since the students often switch tenses.

As number seven comes the progressive, and as mentioned in previous research, the progressive is hard for learners since there is no equivalent form in Swedish (Westergren Axelson & Hahn, 2001:7). This study concludes that year seven made 2.9 errors per 1,000 words and year nine 0.9 errors, concerning both overuse of the progressive, and omission of the progressive by generalizing the past and present. The most common error is according to Estling Vannestål the overuse of the progressive (2007:197). However, one can not come to this conclusion since there are so few
instances of errors within the progressive found in this study, see section 6.6, example (32). In general, these errors are disturbing errors as the essays are readable.

As number eight comes word order, concerning 1,5 errors made by year seven per 1,000 words and 0,3 by year nine. A total of 9 essays out of 60 included a word order error. Most of the errors constructed are due to negative transfer, meaning that a word order from their L1, Swedish, has been used in their L2, English, see section 6.7, example (34). In conclusion, some of these errors can be categorized into disturbing and some as destructive. It all depends on how the word order is constructed and the number of words placed in the wrong position.

Finally, in order of errors made, come the present perfect, the past perfect, the infinitive, mixed bag, the future, and the conditional. All of these categories contain few instances of errors compared with the categories analyzed above. Regarding these categories, year seven made slightly more errors than year nine, after normalizing the scores. In addition, the errors are both disturbing and destructive since many different errors are made. The lack of errors made within these categories might be explained by the lack of essays concerning these categories, since most student essays are written in the present or past tense but can also be explained by avoidance, meaning that the students have avoided these forms since they do not know how to construct them.

In conclusion, after normalizing the errors per 1,000 words, one can say that year nine (52,5 errors per 1,000 words) is slightly better at constructing verb forms than year seven (60,8 errors per 1,000 words), however, the difference is not major. One can only speculate on why there is a minor difference between the two years. However, categories where year nine have produced more errors than year seven could be because of the usage of more advanced sentences or have to do with that they are so into writing that they do not think about grammar. The amount of errors made suggests that verb forms ought to be addressed in junior high school to a greater extent than what they are today.
8. Results: Interview

The content of this section presents and exemplifies the collected data from interviews of five teachers who work in junior high schools. The interview guide and the form that was handed out to all informants can be found in Appendix 1 and 2.

The results of the interviews are categorized into three headings: *The preface of becoming a teacher, Grammar teaching and teaching methods*, and *The strain of teaching verb forms*. The first section provides an insight of the teachers’ previous perception and attitudes on the English subject. The second section focuses on the more general grammar teaching and their personal view on their own teaching style. The third section, concentrates on their attitudes towards grammar, more specifically verbs forms.

8.1 The preface of becoming an English teacher

The purpose of this section is perhaps not to directly answer the research questions of this study, but to merely offer some insight into the teachers’ previous experiences and attitudes towards English. It is my opinion, that this information is a big asset to the analysis to give a well-rounded insight into the informants’ perspectives and attitudes.

There was only one of the teachers that could recollect her English education in elementary school as a subject that was fun and interesting. She enjoyed her classes being very structured and taught traditionally (input-based), and she considered her English teacher to be fun and good at teaching.

The fifth teacher could simply not recall her English education in elementary school at all.

Three other teachers brought to mind their English education in elementary school as boring and/or difficult.

I thought it was really difficult and did not have a very exciting education, I generally thought language was quite boring. When I started studying German in senior high school, language became fun. - Interview 1

I did not like my teachers. I had a teacher in fourth grade that I didn’t like at all. Later, I had a junior high school teacher that I didn’t like at all. In senior high school, I had a teacher that was quite alright.[…]I do not have very positive memories of English. -Interview 3

It was not much fun during elementary school. It was not until senior high school it became fun, because then I got a teacher who worked in many various ways and was not too compelled to the traditional: read the text, study your glossaries, and do the exercises, and finally a test. -Interview 4

When it came to the choice of subjects, English was not an obvious choice to all informants. Two of the teachers only had a few options to choose from due to their first subject, according to
the curriculum that was current at the time that they studied. Perhaps English was not something they were passionate about, but rather the best option at that time. Two of the other teachers claim that they actually chose English as a subject since they enjoy the language. The fifth teacher did not have a second subject in mind after her first subject, but felt that English was a natural choice since she had lived in England for three years, however, the choice was mainly random.

In the context of the questions asking for the advantages and the disadvantages with teaching English as a subject, the answers showed coherent attitudes amongst all teachers, with minor differences. All teachers, except one, answered that the greatest advantage with teaching English had to do with the students’ interest and willingness to learn the language, since it is a part of their students’ everyday life. The teacher who did not give a similar answer asserts that the greatest advantage with the English subject has to do with the big variety of teaching aids that can be used.

You get so much from their leisure time. The time spent in school is such a small part of the time they learn English.[…]That is the only subject that they, without question, do a lot outside school hours. - Interview 1

I experience that there are many who think it is super fun with English and they are really engaged and motivated. And that is fun, it becomes a good circulation of it all. I think it is fun, they think it is fun, and we think it is fun. - Interview 2

You can keep it varied, and bring in so many other subjects.[…]Everyone sees the benefit with English, there is never anyone who would question why one ought to learn English[…]. Even if they do not get a good grade, they still want to be good at the language. - Interview 3

It is probably because there are so much teaching aids to use. It actually occurred to me today when I was to sit down with a new planning for year nine, I noticed “I have not even used the books!” (laughing). - Interview 4

It can also be a bit scary since the students know so much English, even if it is only on a junior high school-level. - Interview 5

The coherens continues in the answers regarding the biggest disadvantages. Once again, four of five teachers agreed that the disadvantages have to do with the students’ big range in skills, thus the difficulty to plan their teaching suitable for every student’s need and ambition. The one teacher who did not join the other teachers’ opinions, stated that the artificial situation that can occur between teachers and students when switching back and forth from English to Swedish, and Swedish to English, is the problematic disadvantage.
The disadvantage can sometimes be, especially if you have your own class, [...because one second you have spoken about something private with them [...] in Swedish, and later when we are going to speak English it can almost feel like you are distancing yourself from them, because you speak a different language. - Interview 5

When it comes to the key to what motivates students, three of the teachers said that it was because of the usefulness of the language and that it is not hard to motivate the students why they should be good at English. The two other teachers said it to be the importance of a good relationship with the students and including them in decision-making.

No, it is that very thing: the usefulness. They understand that whatever they are going to work with, whatever they are going to do, they will benefit from having English. [...] They know that if they are going to travel—that is what most children think of—that, well, “I want to travel, then I have to be able to order food in English”, or whatever it might be. - Interview 2

The key is that you [...] need to get a relationship with your students. They have to feel that you want to teach, that you like them and have an interest in them. [...] I also believe that you have to keep a dialogue [...], but also that they feel that you have distinct frames: clear assignments, clarity, [...] and what demands and criteria for grading and what they have to know. – Interview 5

When I asked them if there was anything in the curriculum that they found difficult to motivate their students to learn, three of the teachers said that it had to do with the geographical aspect of other English-speaking countries, such as dialects and culture, since it is so distant from their everyday life. The two other teachers thought it was the criterion in the curriculum that the students have to develop their skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and to use different strategies to do so.

It might be more difficult to successfully motivate them to actually improve themselves continuously, [...] many students think “the English I have works”. That I can think is a difficulty, to actually aim higher, improve themselves, and learn more. - Interview 1

I believe I am quite bad at teaching strategies for when you write and speak, and the language is inadequate. I think I bring it up to some extent, [...] rephrasing [...] which strategies that are good or bad, [...] and perhaps when you do not understand what a person is saying, the strategy for comprehension. - Interview 3
8.2 Grammar teaching and teaching methods

The questions answered in this section regard grammar on a general level. When it comes to how to integrate grammar in the education of the English subjects, all teachers agreed that the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) are prioritized before grammar. Also, all teachers use their students’ written productions in various ways to address the issues of their grammar skills. Four of the teachers said that they avoid having solid grammar teaching, claiming that it might deprive their students’ self-esteem and drive.

I experience that they do not learn much on solid grammar exercises, rather that they[…]must come to an understanding of how it ought to be[…]and it is much more important to practice reading, writing, speaking and listening[…]to be able to move forward[…]I feel like [too much grammar teaching] hinders them[…]if they only think about grammar all the time. So I probably have too little grammar teaching versus what I should have[,]since I do not want their self-esteem or interest to decrease. - Interview 1

The one teacher who said it was important with some grammar teaching meant that the accuracy of the output must emerge from a theoretical foundation.

I still believe that you have to start by learning the rule first. If you do not[…]know when to use ‘have’ or ‘has’[…]it is okay to just reel it off it, have it as homework, write down “when do you use ‘have?’ After ‘I’, ‘you’”, and so forth. To really do it theoretically in that sense, but later, bring it into the practice, to be able to use it. -Interview 3

All teachers say they try to incorporate grammar teaching in various ways via a variety of teaching aids, such as books, web-sites, materials found online, PowerPoints, etc. Collectively, they all enjoy using different types of text materials as a base for their teaching and both writing and reading.

They write a lot of short texts, as well as long ones[…]You call upon that it is the wrong form of the verb, and then you correct it grammatically. I can also bring it up when reading texts: “Okay, where do you find…,” like, preterite or if you look at the passive construction. “Do you find any passive construction therein?”[…]That is how you can say I integrate [grammar]. -Interview 5

Two of the teachers found that it was rewarding to use school books as the base for their planning and as a guidance for what education that should be included in class. One of the teachers expressed disappointment when it came to grammar exercises in school books:

[]Students think it would be rather boring if they would get a whole exercises book, only containing grammar. They would be like “what is this?!”.[…]Considering book materials, they ought to occur more
natural in the exercises for each text [in English school books], rather than have to look in the back […] to integrate it more natural into the actual working process. - Interview 4

According to most of the teachers, their grammar teaching is not dominated by anything that they think is particularly fun or easy to teach. One said that verbs are good to focus on since verbs are used in all complete sentences of the English language. Interview object number 5 emphasized that teachers usually have a plan of what they need to include in their teaching, and stick to the plan accordingly.

Four of the teachers said they enjoy grammar. One did not share their attitude and stated that she did not enjoy grammar, and everything was boring to the same extent.

I am not very keen on grammar in general. […] Everything is almost just as boring. […] there is nothing I think “this is going to be super fun to do,” it is more that I think it is a must, which you have to do.
- Interview 4

Although, two of the teachers that said that they enjoy teaching grammar explained that they avoid going into prepositions on a thorough level, since it is too intricate for the students’ knowledge level.

Something I do not teach systematically, other than basics, would be prepositions. Because it still has […] some rules regarding it. Of course, I teach the most common ones […] which they usually do not have any problems with. […] But, no, I do not teach specific rules about it. - Interview 2

Of course they notice [my attitude], to some extent […]. There is one thing in grammar that I do not enjoy to teach, because there are no rules, ambiguous, and difficult, which is prepositions […]. They notice that I do not like to teach that specific part. So naturally, you do not do it a lot. - Interview 5

Nonetheless, all informants claim that they do not think that their students would register their attitudes towards grammar in general, regardless if they were positive or negative. Three of them were certain that the students would not notice, whereas one of the teachers said she would exaggerate her enthusiasm if there was anything she would feel is boring or difficult, whilst one said that she might not present it with great enthusiasm (this teacher does not enjoy grammar in general). Two of the teachers said that they were quite open and honest about what they think is difficult. All teachers said that verbs, in general, were one of the major issues, especially the verb be, have and has, and irregular verbs. Other grammar that the teachers experienced the student struggling with was the comparison of adjectives, pronouns (possessive), a and an, contracted forms, subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, and the terminology in general.
8.3 Teaching verb forms

Three of the teachers pointed out irregular verbs in different tenses to be an issue, and even subject-verb agreement was a problem for some of the students.

Partly, it is the irregular verbs in different tenses, which have not occurred to them at all [in the younger years] and is completely new to them in year six. [T]here are many who have difficulties to understand it since they have not had Swedish grammar either, and never discussed verbs[...][A]lso, many miss that third person singular should have an -s[...]. -Interview 1

Well, there are no specific verb forms, because I think they use them pretty well anyway. But of course, the little -s perhaps. -Interview 2

Irregular[...][is] extremely difficult [to understand]. -Interview 4

Sometimes it is actually these irregular verbs, to form them [...]they do not always stick. -Interview 5

Other issues mentioned were the overuse of the progressive, erroneous use of the do-construction, the past tense, the use of both the past and the present tense in a text, the verb be, have and has, and the passive construction. Everyone mentioned during the interviews that students tend to have problems with putting theory into practice, meaning that students say they understand something, but still make those errors in their productions. All teachers also mention that it is important to pick up on the most frequently occurring errors in a student group, and go from there. However, all teachers work with written production to provide feedback on grammatical errors on an individual level.

It is what I mentioned with the essays[,] [...]I pick out the sentences and write that “There are two errors in this sentence”, and then[,]pair up and try to find them, and usually they notice that verb forms are what they make the most errors of[,] [...]I think it is quite good, that you start from their texts actually. -Interview 3

Two of the teachers let their students work as “detectives”, trying to find different verb forms in different kinds of texts, sometimes their own productions or others. Otherwise, they used different materials and exercises to integrate verbs forms, such as homework, fixed verbs to use in texts, grammar exercises, question-making and word order, etc.

[Verb-detec...] in text, that they can[,] underline which verbs they can find, but also “which of these are regular, which are irregular and why?”[,] [...]When asking questions, then verbs are also integrated in where to place them in the sentence. -Interview 2
They work with irregular verbs and have a few for homework each week. [...] Today in their English test, [...] we made up that they had been to Seaworld, and that they would have to use at least four of the irregular verbs we had had for homework when writing a post card. Perhaps they would write “I saw a shark. He caught a fish and ate it”. So you force them to use it in their own production. -Interview 1

The teachers mainly had a general and common idea of how to respond to destructive and disturbing errors. However, even if their responses were mainly the same, some minor differences were noteworthy. For example, interview object number 1 was rather firm and explained to her students that some errors are destructive whilst some are disturbing. But in her grading and evaluation she was not as strict regarding disturbing and destructive errors.

"However, when it comes to set a grade for a student, I try to think in a different way [...]“well, would an English speaking person actually understand this fairly meager text?”, even if the student uses all verbs in past tense, regularly formed. -Interview 1

Interview object number 2, who teach younger children as well, mentions that the errors becomes more disturbing than destructive the older they get. She emphasizes that spelling errors can become destructive, since the reader might have to stop and figure out what the writer actually meant with the misspelled word. The third interview object agrees with interview object number two and emphasizes that the errors made by junior high school students are mainly disturbing, but then again basic grammar errors can become destructive.

[...] It could be destructive if you mix tense forms and you cannot read in the text “when did this ‘happen?’” [...].

She also mentions that it depends on how many errors a student would make in general. Even if the errors would be basic, the amount of errors could be destructive for the text’s intelligibility. Interview object number 4 is in line with the opinion based on whether an English speaking person would understand a text or not when it comes to disturbing and destructive errors. However, she also mentions that her evaluation of disturbing and destructive errors can depend on how skilled the student is. Interview object number 5 is also quite distinct in what destructive errors would be.

When you do not fully know the be-verb, how it is formed, [...]’have’ or ‘has’ [...] when to put the -s on the verb, that is what I think are destructive errors. [...] Writing in different tense forms can also be destructive.
However, she says that she would not inform the students whether they make a destructive or disturbing error. As well as the teacher from interview 4, the teacher from interview 5 agrees that the perception of disturbing and destructive errors is affected by how skilled the student is.

When it came to the question about the challenges of teaching verb forms in relation to the students’ knowledge, the opinions of the teachers varied. Three teachers mentioned the students’ lack of interest in grammar. Other challenges mentioned were irregular verbs, vocabulary, rephrasing, the difference between was and were, the past tense, to put theory to practice, and to adapt the teaching so it is challenging to all students.
9. Analysis: Interview

In this section, the teachers’ attitudes and teaching methods are analyzed, emanating from this study’s third and fourth research questions.

Going over all the transcribed interviews, it is evident that the teachers in general aim for a student-centered approach in the classroom, where a variety of exercises is preferred, and a democratic approach where the students are to take part of deciding the content of their own education. Nonetheless, the demarcation line between a student-centered teacher and a teacher-centered teacher appears to be fine, since it apparently easily can be crossed. Even if the student-centered approach is a trend with a more progressive agenda, the informants testify about clear characteristics of a more traditional teacher-centered approach when it comes to their grammar teaching. Boström seems to have a similar result in her study in the Swedish subject area, that teachers tend to return to old traditional patterns with a more teacher-centered approach when it comes to grammar teaching (2004:187). Despite the fact that several of the teachers stated that they preferred a variety of teaching aids, they all used the same materials or exercises as examples in the interviews. Teaching aids and exercises mainly focused on input-based (mostly visual and auditory) exercises. Examples of such teaching aids were fill-out exercises, lectures, text books, and corrective feedback. As defined previously in this study, this is in line with the teacher-centered approach, where the teacher as an authority figure passes along knowledge to passive students (Boström, 2004:20-5; teach.com). All teachers state that they think it is rewarding to use texts as a teaching aid in the grammar teaching, regardless if it is their own productions or from another author. Teachers assessed that it is rewarding to use texts to create a meaningful context to the students and still maintain clear structured grammar teaching. Perhaps they find it easy to combine traditional teaching methods with material that has a context that can be related to the students’ own interests, and in that manner make the teaching more progressive.

The teaching methods and teaching aids exemplified by the teachers interviewed in this study are problematic in the sense that they are mostly visual. The issue with this is that not all students require the same teaching methods due to different learning styles. In Boström’s study, approximately half of the students said that they preferred a variety of exercises, whilst it was only about 3% who preferred visual learning. Boström further assesses that this is an issue, since this means that traditional teaching only using school books, exercises, and lectures appeals to approximately a fourth of the students, whereas those who need more physical activity and the 56% who needs variety usually do not get their needs fulfilled (Boström, 2004:181). Hence, that ultimately means that the traditional teacher-centered approach is not suitable for grammar teaching since it is not accessible to all students, which might also be a cause to why so many of the interviewed teachers experienced that their students do not enjoy grammar teaching.

So why have a teacher-centered approach when it is clear that it is not a successful way to teach grammar, when also the informants want a more student-centered approach? Boström believed that the return to the traditional teacher-centered approach in grammar teaching probably had to
do with the history of grammar teaching. It was a generic opinion of the purpose of grammar, and how it ought to be taught (2004:187). The perception of what grammar teaching ought to be like is probably so fundamentally established that it is almost didactically impossible to release ourselves of the image of the traditional grammar teacher.

According to all teachers interviewed for this study, except for one, grammar is something fun and rewarding to teach. Even if our study does not focus on senior high school teachers but on junior high school, Brodow found in his study that it was mainly the teachers of the vocational programs who felt the necessity to tone down the grammar teaching (Brodow et al., 2000:132-3). However, three of the teachers in our study said that they did not want to incorporate solid grammar teaching, but integrated it into other teaching areas. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that the teachers do not know how to teach grammar without avoiding traditional teacher-centered teaching, and therefore try to integrate grammar into their other teaching. The two teachers who stated that they enjoyed grammar as a separate part of the education were representatives of the traditional approach, which might be a reason to why they are not opposed to include a great deal of grammar in their teaching.

An interesting fact was that four of the teachers claimed that they did not put extra attention on anything particular in their grammar teaching, but everyone did emphasize at some point in the interviews that verbs are something that continuously need extra attention. Evidently, even if the teachers interviewed, at first, could not recognize it, verb forms are a grammatical issue that frequently need to be brought up in class or focused on in students’ output. According to all informants, irregular verbs were an especially big issue amongst students. Subject-verb agreement was not considered to be an issue in general, rather that some students knew it, and some did not. Tense could be an issue, but not always, and not according to all teachers.

According to previous research, these are areas that L2 learners, especially Swedish students tend to make errors in (Källkvist & Peterson, 2005:117; Collins, 2007:301). Brodow concluded in his study that the terminology of grammar was one of the biggest challenges (Brodow et al., 2000:105), but only one of the five teachers agreed. One of the issues the others assessed to be a problem was how to motivate all students to learn and get them engaged in the grammar teaching, as well as putting their theoretical knowledge into practical use, resulting in correct use of grammar. The results in our study suggest that the teacher-centered approach is not particularly successful because it influences students to think that grammar is something boring or difficult.

It is difficult to understand some points when looking at the evidence at hand. The teachers seem to hold on to a teacher-centered approach, even if it does not appeal to the students and their needs. On the other hand, they pointed out that they preferred a student-centered approach. Brodow emphasizes the importance to continuously educate yourself as a teacher, but he found in his study that the teachers believe that it is enough with the grammar knowledge they have got from their own teaching education, and do not really think it is important to follow the development and research done in grammar. They mainly consider grammar as never changing and
fixed (Brodow et al., 2000:133-4). Perhaps we need to examine the grammar teaching in the education of teachers: does it promote a traditional teacher-centered grammar teaching, hard to look beyond?

When it comes to destructive and disturbing errors, several of the teachers assessed that verb form errors usually were more disturbing than destructive. Four of the informants addressed quite simple forms of grammar to be destructive if not used correctly, which was explained as the simple errors being so very disturbing that they would become destructive errors. Only one informant mentioned that spelling can be an issue if a word can be interpreted as something else. Also, the approach on how to deal with destructive and disturbing errors in the students’ feedback varied. One of the teachers claimed that she was tough on her students saying that an error is destructive, even though she actually thought it to be more disturbing. Three of the other teachers would adjust their feedback on destructive and disturbing errors depending on how strong (more markings) or weak (fewer markings, mainly destructive errors) the students are in English. Aligned with our definition of destructive errors, interview object number 3 agreed that a bigger number of errors in a text can be considered to be destructive. However, this issue was not mentioned by the other informants.
10. Discussion

The main focus of this essay concern SLA, by investigating how students acquire a second language, especially verb forms, by investigating both students and teachers. Below, the results and analyses from both the textual analysis and the interviews are combined, serving as a discussion for the aim and research questions asked in section 4.

The results of the verb form categories showed that spelling, auxiliary verbs, subject-verb agreement, irregular verbs, tense and the progressive hold the most errors. The analysis of the seventh graders and the ninth graders showed that year nine had better results than year seven, however, interestingly enough, in some categories, year seven produced better results than year nine. The results of this analysis is developed below and is somewhat coherent with the previous research presented in section 3.1 as can be seen in the analysis in section 7.

The results and analysis from the interviews with the teachers showed that English is a very rewarding subject to teach, and it is generally not difficult to motivate the students to learn the language. However, the teachers could depict areas within the subject that can be a bit harder to motivate, such as grammar. The attitudes towards teaching grammar are quite positive amongst the informants. However, a slight majority feel that they need to tone down the grammar teaching not to deprive their students’ interests in English and their motivation. It appears that the teachers have difficulties to unite grammar teaching with teaching that aims to develop their students’ language skills. The student-centered approach is hard to reach in the grammar teaching, since they clearly have difficulties to imagine grammar teaching as anything else than traditional with a teacher-centered approach.

What can be collected from the results and analysis of the interviews is that the teachers generally have a positive attitude towards grammar teaching, but do not experience the same enthusiasm amongst their students. They are still puzzled over the fact that students do not seem to enjoy grammar teaching and do not feel sure how to motivate them to learn.

To connect all the different parts of this study, the correlation between the actual errors students in junior high school tend to make, and the teachers’ perceptions of which errors they think junior high school students make, have to be compared. To logically compare the results of the most frequent errors and the errors that teachers think are the most frequent, the comparison will begin from the category with the highest percentage of errors, and continue with the category of the next highest percentage of errors, and so forth.

Looking and comparing the result of the most frequent errors, spelling had the highest percentage of errors with 32%. However, this result is not possible to compare with the responses received in the interviews, since spelling was never offered as an option in the responses, and was probably not brought to mind by any of the teachers when discussing the frequencies of verb form errors. This since spelling errors is not seen as a grammatical error but as a lexical error. However, in this study we included spelling errors in verb phrases since they were extensive. This is probably why the results found in the corpus study did not correspond to the results found in the interview study.
The second most frequent verb form category was auxiliary verbs with 20% of the errors. There were only three of the teachers that even mention anything about auxiliary verbs, whereas one mentioned the do-construction, which has been pointed out as a minor error concerning auxiliary verbs in the results, section 6.2. Two of the teachers assessed that the students have to work with contractions, since the students seem to have difficulties to learn how to use them. It is remarkable that verb form errors with such high frequency as the auxiliary category is not addressed as a bigger issue by all teachers than what was pointed out during the interviews.

Subject-verb agreement fell into third place of the errors, consisting of 19%. By reading through the transcriptions of the interviews, all teachers mention the issue of subject-verb agreement, but do not address it as a very severe issue, and certainly nothing that is a problem with most of the students, only consistent with some. However, what the teachers do not seem to realize is that the issues of incorrect use of have and has, was and were is a subject-verb agreement error, which all teachers claim to be a problem.

Next in line is tense 12% (past 7% and present 5%) and irregular verbs 8%, which are errors that often occur together, both in the student texts from ULEC and according to several of the teachers. Meaning that the errors found regarding tense often are irregular verb errors where the students have used the wrong form if an irregular verb which creates a tense error.

The progressive is next in line with 3%. There were only two informants who even brought it up, but they expressed it in a sense that “of course they make mistakes”, which indicates that it is a common error, but not disturbing enough to pay extra attention to. This could be a reason why so few of the informants mention the progressive.

The rest of the categories: word order, the present perfect, past perfect, the infinitive, the future and the conditional were not mentioned by the teachers and therefore, one can assume that they did not see these verb form categories as an issue. It is noteworthy that the answers of the teachers and the results of the error analysis did not correspond fully, with some significant deviations.

As evident from the interviews, teachers seem to think that most errors are disturbing rather than destructive. Errors mentioned as destructive were mainly basic grammar errors, and one informant mentioned spelling. The same conclusion can be drawn from the textual analysis, whereas most errors are of a disturbing character. However, the disturbing errors concerning tense can become destructive when reading a whole essay, since most student essays analyzed switched tenses. The teachers generally did not give feedback that showed if an error was disturbing or destructive, but the teachers would adjust their markings on disturbing or destructive errors depending on if it was a strong student or a week student. In regard of the results just mentioned, our study is mostly coherent with the results found in the studies of Brodow (2000) and Boström (2004) as can be seen in the analysis section 9.

Evidently, students in junior high school have issues with verbs forms, which also the teachers point out. However, focus is not generally put into these, since the teachers express that the four skills are more essential to focus on which is aligned with the main goals in the curriculum of the
English subject. Worth to note is that the importance of communication is more emphasized in the curriculum than the importance of correctness, which consequently guides the teachers in how they structure their work. The problem appears to be that the teachers do not simply know how to integrate grammar teaching with the four skills in a student-centered approach, which leads to students that do not know how to construct verb forms.
11. Conclusion

The purpose of this corpus- and interview based study was to investigate the errors in written productions made by Swedish students in junior high school, where the differences between year seven and nine were compared. Also, the study was supplemented with the examination of how teachers’ attitudes towards grammar affected their teaching method, and in addition, the study investigated which verb form errors teachers thought their students had issues with.

The results showed that Swedish students had problems with spelling, auxiliary verbs, subject-verb agreement, tense, and the progressive, where many errors were made. It was found, after the normalization of the data, that there was a minor difference between year seven and nine. The results of the interviews showed that teachers generally enjoyed grammar teaching, however, they did not seem to be able to move away from the traditional teacher-centered approach in their grammar teaching. The teachers perceived that students thought irregular verbs and subject-verb agreement as being especially difficult to grasp, and other verb form errors mentioned were tense, contractions, and the progressive.

We carry the attitude that it is impressive that Swedes are so good at English as a foreign language, however, it is quite disturbing that many of the errors students make, such as verb form errors, are rather basic even if they are taught English from an early age. We reason that this has to do with the teachers’ attitudes and teaching methods. We are of the opinion that the education of language teachers need to be reformed and provide tools to help professional teachers to move towards a student-centered approach, which is more applicable to the needs of students, and thereby enable students to be more successful when working with grammar. It is our expectation that universities and in-job training conform to emphasize a student-centered approach towards grammar teaching.

We know that the connection between teaching methods and learning styles are strongly linked, and therefore encourage other studies to be made in the connection between teaching methods, attitudes, grammar and learning styles, since our study merely scratch the surface of this area.
12. References


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13. Appendix

Appendix 1: Semi-structured interview guide

Main theme 1: Perspective on the subject area
  Sub-theme 1: Choice of subject
  1. How come you chose English to be one of your subjects?
  2. How did you perceive English as a subject during your time in elementary school?

  Sub-theme 2: Pros and cons with being an English teacher
  1. What are the advantages with teaching English?
  2. What are the disadvantages with teaching English?

  Sub-theme 3: Motivation
  1. What do you believe is key for getting students motivated to learn?
  2. Is there anything in the curriculum that you find more difficult to motivate students to learn?

Main theme 2: Grammar as part of the education
  Sub-theme 1: Integrating grammar teaching
  1. How do you integrate your grammar teaching?
  2. What kind of teaching aid do you experience works best in grammar teaching?
  3. Is there anything in English grammar you feel that you need to focus any extra on?

  Sub-theme 2: Positive experiences with grammar education
  1. From a time perspective, does the grammar that you find especially fun or easy affect your teaching?

  Sub-theme 3: Negative experiences with grammar education
  1. From a time perspective, does the grammar that you find especially boring or difficult affect your teaching?
  2. Do you think that your students register your attitude to what you consider boring or difficult?

Main theme 3: Verb forms in grammar education
  Sub-theme 1: Verb forms, students, and education
  1. Which verb forms do you think students in grades 7-9 have most difficult with?
  2. How do you integrate verb forms in your education?
3. Which teaching aids do you think are best to conform in your teaching of verb forms?

*Sub-theme 2: Challenges with students and verb forms*

1. What is your opinion on disturbing and destructive errors and mistakes of verb forms?
2. What do you consider to be the biggest challenge when it comes to students knowledge of verb forms?
Appendix 2: Contract form

Interviewer: Sofia Bergström        Tutor: Christine Johansson        Uppsala Universitet

Information about the teacher

Name:        First name                    Last name
Age:            YYYYMMDD

School:

Years as a professional teacher:

Qualified in subject:

Teach year:

Conditions: It is important to us that you who is interviewed feel comfortable sharing the information you provide. Personal information such as name and school will not be exposed in the study. The interviewer takes the right to to use other information, such as age, gender, qualifications, etc. The interviewer takes the right to transcribe the interview and use its data in the study.

The interviewed
Date
________________________________________________
Signature
________________________________________________

The interviewer
Date
________________________________________________
Signature
________________________________________________