
Are Girls One Step Ahead when Learning English?

A Study of Gender Differences in Language Acquisition

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Abstract

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This essay was underpinned by the premise that boys and girls receive an equal education in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in Swedish schools. The purpose with this essay was to examine whether there are any differences between boys and girls when it comes to understanding grammatical structures and listening comprehension in English in a county in central Sweden. The investigation focused on tests that were carried out after every section of teaching in the various areas. A descriptive method was used which consisted of quantitative approaches; i.e. content analysis of questionnaires answered by 60 pupils in the ages of 10-11. A following analysis was thereafter conducted with reference to the theories by Vygotskij, Piaget and Skinner that are used in the investigation.

The results showed that the girls had slightly better results in all of the tests in grammatical structures except one, and in all of the listening comprehension questionnaires, which indicates a better understanding of these parts in EFL learning. It remains to be established why these differences have occurred as the number of pupils in the study cannot be considered valid as representations of Swedish pupils in general. The conclusion of the result however, was that educators in EFL need to increase their knowledge concerning differences in learning between boys and girls. They also need to consider whether the EFL lessons being delivered in classrooms are equally beneficial to both sexes.

Key words: Learning differences boys and girls, gender studies, language studies

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Basis of the Study

Many language teachers come to a certain point in their professional careers where they start to give thought to how their pupils absorb knowledge. Teaching material provided, and that is used in EFL (English as Foreign Language) teaching at Swedish schools, is constructed so as to include all important parts when learning languages, such as listening comprehension, speech, dialogues, and writing. Not to be ignored, however, is whether there is a difference between what catches the interest from boys in learning material, and what catches the interest from girls. Some pupils seem to pick up new words and grammar at once whilst other pupils struggle despite many hours of studying and listening to English. Swedish schools do not often form groups according to ability in EFL teaching. Nor do they often divide into gender-segregated classes, as schooling should be the same regardless of sex. The question is, though, whether boys and girls would benefit from such gender-segregated classes at a certain age, as there is a perception that boys mature later than girls.

There are many different ways to learn languages, such as by listening to people speaking, by reading books, by conversing with people and by having teachers explain grammatical structures. These are just a few ways to increase pupils' language knowledge, there are many more. An important question to be asked is whether boys and girls learn in the same way or if they would draw benefits from being taught in different manners. Most studies concerning SLA (second language acquisition) have been carried out in situations where the learner has access to the second language not only in the classroom, but in the world in which s/he is daily immersed. This is, obviously, very different from foreign language settings in which the learner has access to the input provided in the classroom and little else (Cook, 1999).

This essay seeks to discover whether girls are better at learning foreign languages than boys. Even though Swedish children are exposed to English on an everyday basis, I believe that they have quite a good understanding of individual words, but have some difficulties in understanding grammatical structures. My aim is to establish whether boys have more difficulties in this than girls. I will also investigate whether there are any differences between boys and girls when it comes to listening comprehension. Most Swedish children hear spoken English on a regular basis through media such as TV, computers and music. My aim is to look into whether a difference can be established between boys and girls when it comes to understanding spoken English. As I currently work as an English teacher myself, my plan will be to use English as the current foreign language in the research.

To create an understanding for how children learn, I will be referring to theories in knowledge development, cognitive development and behaviorism, and through these theories discuss the results of my study.

Having been a teacher for many years now, it is my experience that there has been a belief among many, both within school and from other people in society, that boys are better at learning mathematics and science, whereas girls find it easier to learn languages. Consideration needs to be given to whether this is true, or if it is simply a much repeated myth.

1.2 Aim and Purpose

The aim of this essay is to establish whether or not there are gender differences to be seen between Swedish pupils in middle school concerning their knowledge when it comes to learning grammatical structures in English, and to listening comprehension.

1.3 Thesis Questions

- Are there differences to be found between Swedish girls and boys in the ages of 10-11, when understanding and being able to use English grammatical structures in a correct manner?
- Are there differences to be found between Swedish girls and boys in the ages of 10-11, when understanding spoken English?

2. Theoretical Background

I will be relating to Vygotskij's theories on cognitive development, Piaget's theories on knowledge development and Skinner's theory – behaviorism. I will utilize these theories in order to attain an understanding as to how children learn. Below follows a description of the theories, and also how they will be used in my study.

2.1 Vygotskij's Theories on Cognitive Development.

Vygotskij pursued two main principles when it came to cognitive development; the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotskij's development theory: In his cognitive development theory, Vygotskij argued that learning impacts development: Firstly, children construct knowledge. Learning can then lead development. However, learning cannot be separated from its social context. In addition, language plays a central role in mental development. . Vygotskij envisioned a more complex relationship between development and learning than Piaget and Pavlov had conceived. Vygotskij emphasized the importance of assisting children to use strategies to further their intellectual capacity. The area between the level of independent performance and the level of assisted performance is the zone of proximal development; it is here that the teacher must focus attention. Vygotskij saw this zone as the area where the most guidance should be given, to allow the child to develop skills they can then use on their own, and which enables them to develop higher mental functions. Vygotskij's work reminds us of the processes necessary for children to regulate their internal and external behavior. Children should draw their experiences, talk to each other about it, write about it and even to talk to themselves about it; this enables them to work at becoming independent learners (Litowitz,1989)

As mentioned, Vygotskij's development theory also included the concept of *a more knowledgeable other* (MKO). This person is someone who has a higher level of ability or a better understanding than the learner, considering of course what is being learned. It is not always necessarily an older person that has a higher ability: in certain cases, for example, with computers or other technical devices, youngsters have a better understanding than many adults who, in this case, would be the learners. Today, a more knowledgeable other does not even have to be a person. Support systems or electronic tutors can be used to aid a learner. What signifies a more knowledgeable other, though, is that s/he knows more about the topic being learned than the learner (Bruner, 1978).

Furthermore, the concept of the more knowledgeable other is related to *the zone of proximal development* (ZPD). Proximal development is the difference between what a child can achieve by herself, and what a child can achieve when being guided by a more knowledgeable other. Here, in this zone, is where the most sensitive guidance should be given, allowing the learner to develop his/her skills and, therefore, reach a higher mental level (Bruner, 1978). This has been proven by a study of a girl trying to build a jigsaw puzzle. As her results were poor, her father gave her guidance as how to structure her building, by laying out the four corners to begin with, and encouraging her to carry on building. As she became surer of herself, her father guided her towards working more independently.

According to Vygotskij, this type of interaction is what enforces cognitive development (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010).

2.2 Piaget

Piaget claimed that knowledge is formed progressively through sequences of behavior, also named “schemas”. When new experiences occur for a child, he/she incorporates them into an already existing schema and, therefore, adapts to the new situation, which Piaget called “accommodation”. This development happens through an internalization process. That is, “the outside is made into the inside”, that all organisms actively try to adapt to the outside world. If, for example, a baby who uses a teddy bear to suck on to fulfill its needs eventually realizes that the teddy bear has other functional capabilities, the baby responds. One can say that the baby re-evaluates her knowledge and her way of understanding has developed and changed (Jerlang, 2008).

Piaget described four stages of knowledge development: the sensori-motor (0-2 years), the preoperational (2-6/7 years), the concrete operational (6/7 -11/12 years) and the formal operational stage (11/12-15 years). Piaget argued that intelligence develops in a series of stages that are related to age and are progressive because one stage must be accomplished before the next can occur. For each stage of development the child forms a view of reality for that period. At the next stage, the child must keep up with earlier level of mental abilities to reconstruct concepts. Piaget visualized intellectual development as an upward expanding spiral in which children must constantly reconstruct the ideas formed at earlier levels with new, higher order concepts acquired at the next level. Vygotskij shared Piaget’s opinion concerning the constructive nature of intellectual development. When it comes to cognitive development, however, Vygotskij believed that it happens within a social context, that the child develops its way of thinking through social interaction. (Jerlang, 2008).

2.3 Skinner and Behaviorism

When discussing language and learning, there is usually a distinction between *first language* and *second language*. In literature the abbreviations L1 and L2 are used (L standing for language). A first language is the language an individual is exposed to first, through parents or other guardians, whereas the term “second language” is used for any other language learning after the first language has been established. This does not necessarily mean that a person’s first language always is the best known language. With regard to immigration, it is much more common amongst children in families that have emigrated to other countries that they will eventually master their second language better than their first language (del Pilar Garcia Mayo and Luisa Garcia Lecumberri, 2003).

When it came to the theory of behaviorism, it was generally assumed that human behavior, including linguistic behavior, was built on habits. All kinds of learning, language learning as well as other learning, were seen as an establishment of habits by imitation, practice and feedback. This also applied to learning a second language and, therefore, teaching in SLA at this time was dominated by imitation of certain structures and corrections given by teachers. An important part of behaviorism theory concerns how already learned behavior affects the learning of new behavior, which also means that already established habits complicate the establishment of new habits. An important concept concerning the above is transfer – that is the transmission of old habits when learning something new. A distinction is made between positive transfer and negative transfer (also called interference). Positive transfer is what takes place when already established habits match new habits that are to be established, which means that learning is made easier. Conversely, interference occurs when old habits do not conform to new habits and, instead, it sets up barriers for the establishment of new learning. A person with good knowledge of languages will be more influenced by already established knowledge than a person who masters only one language and, therefore, is more likely to transfer old habits. Differences in structures between a person's native language and the second language being learned is what creates difficulties in SLA, according to behaviorism (Lado, 1957:2).

Lado writes: “We assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult” (Lado 1957:2). That is, the more and the greater differences that are to be found between L1 and L2, the more distinctive were the learning difficulties. This was expressed by Weinreich; “The greater the difference between two systems, the more numerous the mutually exclusive forms and patterns in each, the greater is the learning problem and the potential area of interference”. (Weinrich 1953:1).

Above are several theories which seek to explain how children learn. Looking at my research and also at the earlier research that I am referring to, I will try to discover whether there are any differences between boys and girls when learning languages and why these differences occur.

3. Earlier Research

A substantial amount of material can be found in earlier research when looking at second language acquisition. There is also plenty of research to be found concerning how, and at what stage of their development, children learn. However, I have had some difficulties in finding research into the differences between girls and boys when learning languages. I also had difficulties in finding material concerning EFL that only concerns classroom learning. The greater part of research that has been done

when it comes to SLA deals with students who are continually exposed to the language in question on an everyday basis, within school as well as outside school.

I have searched on Google, Google Scholar, Libris, the Library catalogue, Diva and the National Agency for Education. I have also looked at earlier essays about learning and gender studies as to acquire literature suggestions. My keywords have been: differences between girls and boys when learning, second language acquisition, how do children learn, English as a foreign language and gender studies.

3.1 Board of Investigation – Finland

In the middle of the 1990s, information was gathered regarding learning results and also what attitude Finnish pupils had concerning foreign languages. Girls showed better results in both English and Swedish in a nationwide test that took place in 1995. Less interest was shown by boys in foreign language as a subject in school than was shown by girls. These findings were obtained by the Finnish Board of Education that conducted a study called “School – Gender – Learning results” in 2004.

A national evaluation of the learning results in English amongst 5 000 pupils in grade nine was carried out in 1999. This study showed that girls had better results than boys in all areas. The boys’ strongest abilities were listening- and reading comprehension whilst they showed significantly weaker productive skills (Board of Education, Finland, 2004).

Three years later, in 2002, an international evaluation was conducted concerning learning outcomes in the subject English. This study showed that most of the differences between boys and girls were in written composition and linguistic structures, and the least differences could be found in listening comprehension (ibid).

In the next paragraph there will follow more about differences in language skills and what parts of the brain that are connected to language work.

3.2 Language Skills

According to the magazine “Illustrated Science” and its article “Do Boys and Girls Learn Differently From Each Other?”, boys and girls perceive and process sight- and sound impressions in different ways. This is expressed, for example, when learning languages. According to the article, researchers have, for a long period of time, presumed that girls have better language skills than boys. It has been found that certain areas of the brain that are connected to language work more intensively in girls

when addressing language tasks, and that boys and girls are dependent on different parts of the brain when processing these tasks. By letting children read words without hearing them and also by making them listen to words without seeing them, researchers have found that language processing is more sensory amongst boys and more abstract amongst girls. (Anon., Illustrerad Vetenskap. 2009).

When dealing with language, girls activate areas of the brain that are connected to abstract thinking, whereas boys instead activate visual and auditory areas, which means that the learning process when it comes to languages, is different between the two sexes. If girls find it easier to store information in linguistic centers of the brain, they will then be better in subjects that require linguistic and abstract thinking. Boys, however, can improve their oral presentations by listening more to the language being learned, and improve their written presentations by reading more. (ibid).

New research, according to the article, shows that men have 6.5 times as much grey matter in their brains as women, whilst women have 10 times as much white matter as men. This can explain why men often are better at mathematics, whereas women are better at languages. (ibid).

3.3 Parts of the Brain Used When Learning Languages

In the magazine “All There is to Know About Science” and its article “Differences in Language Learning When it Comes to Gender”, there is a similar claim that boys and girls use different parts of the brain when dealing with language tasks. A study from Northwestern University in Evanston indicates that different learning methods for boys and girls could be a good idea. Previous research indicates that, on average, girls achieve better results than boys in both oral and written sections of language tests. The study included boys and girls in the age span of nine to fifteen years, and consisted of measurements of their brain activity during lessons in foreign languages, which showed that the parts of the brain that process language were more active in the girls than the boys. Douglas Burman at Northwestern University in Evanston claims that this does not necessarily have to be a fact all the way up to adulthood, but explains that boys mature later than girls, and therefore it could be beneficial to have pupils divided into separate boys and girls classes at certain ages, for example 6th grade. (Anon., All om Vetenskap. 2008).

3.4 Differences and Similarities in How Boys and Girls Learn

With regard to cognitive skills, that is the skills that make it possible for us to think, remember and learn, the largest gender differences are found in verbal and language skills (Cook, 2009). On the website “education.com”, this can be read on the page called “Similarities and Differences Between Boys and Girls”;

Girls seem to have a tendency to produce words earlier than boys, know a larger number of words, and have a higher level of language complexity already in early ages. Differences in verbal skills during school ages are writing and spelling, and they are in the favor of girls. The difference in writing remains stable between the sexes throughout adolescence, whereas accuracy at spelling tends to even itself out over the years (ibid).

However, differences in learning in several skills have diminished between girls and boys during the last two to three decades, which indicates that socialization most certainly plays a role in gender differences. Even so, when certain differences are consistent over time, we still cannot really be sure why they exist. Biological factors and social factors as well as different experiences are most probably involved (ibid).

As seen above, there seems to be a difference in how boys and girls learn and, in the next section, I will seek to establish the extent to which this is evident in their school performance.

3.5 Gender Differences in School Performance

In Sweden today, it is taken for granted that boys and girls have the same rights to a high quality education. However, it is not even 100 years ago that what was called “realskolan”, an optional form of schooling equivalent to grade 7-9, was opened up to girls in this country. Looking at the world from a global perspective, in certain parts of the world, education for boys is still highly prioritized. Public school systems were established to begin with, for boys, and not all boys, but only for boys from higher levels of society. When society changed and feminist groups eventually demanded that schools should be open for girls, doubts were expressed as to whether girls would be able to manage the same education as boys, and if this even was necessary. Some could perceive this as a threat to the social fabric, and to the human race, if girls were educated during puberty. In view of this background, it may appear paradoxical that education problems that have to do with gender have, in the recent decades shown that boys’ performance in school is inferior to the performance of girls (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006).

According to Fischbein (2007), the difference in maturation process between boys and girls causes the latter to face greater difficulties when faced with demands that they cannot meet. (s.25) This problem is not amongst all boys however; when claiming that “boys are the losers in today’s schools” the issue is not about boys in general, but instead boys in certain subgroups. Still, to continue conducting research concerning gender differences in school can give us an understanding of what factors contribute to pupils’ performance. It is important to remember, though, that it is always problematic to look upon boys and girls as two opposing and internally homogeneous groups (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006).

In the results from an investigation that was conducted by the National Agency for Education in 2006, it states that part of the reason that girls have better results in school is that girls spend more time with and engage more in their school work. Researchers wondered why this was the case, and they eventually concluded that the likely cause was to be found in attitudes and behaviors related to masculinity and femininity (ibid).

The following paragraph will lead into how, and in which way, pupils learn modern languages.

3.6 Strategies When Learning Modern Languages

It has been my experience in 15 years working as a language teacher that many foreign language teachers will just have entered their profession as teachers when they start asking themselves why their pupils do not learn what they are trying to teach them. The pupils may appear to have understood, and immersed themselves into assignments and exercises that have been presented to them. Yet, when it finally comes to tests, it is shown, time after time, that they have not been able to learn what language teachers have been trying to share. In order to better understand and address the deficiencies, we can begin by making two working assumptions. The first of these is that the majority of students are applying themselves to the learning process for the majority of time in class and, secondly, that they have a problem in that their way of thinking is not always consistent with the rules of the language being learned. Therefore it is of great importance as a language teacher to pay attention to *how* each individual student thinks, and *which approaches* she uses in her attempts to solve language tasks. If we can increase our understanding of what mechanisms are behind pupils’ language learning, it should be easier to adjust our way of teaching so these two match to a greater extent. This is what five language professors wanted to find out more about when they conducted a project called “STRIMS” which stands for “strategies when learning foreign languages”, and which resulted in a book called *In the Mind of a Student*. The project deals with different parts of learning languages, such as linguistic awareness, word comprehension, vocabulary learning, word usage, listening comprehension, speech, reading comprehension and interaction. (Malmberg, 2000). As my study is focused on listening

comprehension and understanding grammatical structures, I will look more closely into these parts of the study.

3.6:1 Listening Comprehension

Looking back at the history of language teaching, one can see that it took quite some time before teachers developed a deeper interest in the skill of being able to listen to and understand spoken language. Rivers elucidates: *“Teaching the comprehension of a foreign language is of primary importance if the communicative aim is to be achieved. A frequently neglected area, listening comprehension has its peculiar problems which arise from the fleeting immaterial nature of spoken language and the complicated ways we process what we hear.”* (1981:151)

In Sweden, we have, however, focused on increasing students’ abilities in understanding spoken language earlier than many other countries. Listening comprehension was one of the parts in national tests performed all over the country already at the beginning of the 1960s. Swedish students are, and have always been, used to listening to English in their everyday lives, and have therefore achieved high results on these national tests already from the start (Malmberg, 1975).

To be able to understand what is being said in a foreign language, it is necessary that the recipient can “crack the code”. That means that the recipient can decipher the message that the speaker is sending in the form of audible signals, and this is what is interesting for language researchers to look at, namely, a student’s approach at deciphering (Malmberg, 2000).

In the STRIMS project, it can be seen that many pupils are exposed to listening comprehension that is above their level of understanding. That is, their ability to decode (understand what is being said or written) does not meet the demands, and therefore there is a need of a systematic training so that pupils can reach the level of listening comprehension that is required in today’s communicative environment. This is Rost’s contention *“Learning to listen is a continuous process of the listeners’ attempting to increase their capacity to interpret and respond to language events. The developmental process is continual in the sense that every act of understating widens the ability to understand. This leads to the well-known hermeneutic circle: what we understand is based on what we already know, and what we already know comes from being able to understand”* (1990:155).

3.6:2 Learning Grammar

Still on the topic of the STRIMS project, a major interest for the researchers was to find out if pupils could show that they understood what was grammatically correct by referring to the rule that applied for that specific area. In the Swedish education system, it is common that teachers explain the rules of grammar as early as the middle school stage, that is pupils from the age of 10 to the age of 13. These grammar rules occur all through school in all foreign languages, and it is questionable as to whether pupils are able to benefit from these rules that educators introduce to them in their teaching, and what use pupils can make of their explanations. It is also of interest to consider the extent to which pupils become better at languages by learning grammatical rules and this is quite important for language teachers to know that time used on teaching these rules is time well spent. With regard to research concerning implicit learning within neuropsychology, scientists believe that there is a subconscious memory marking what occurs when listening to languages that can explain how we can know certain rules without being able to explain them (Malmberg, 2000).

In the next paragraph, I will try to shed light on other important factors central to language learning, such as classroom situations.

3.7 What Happens in the Classroom is Decisive for What is Being Learned.

Bergström stresses the necessity of having a good learning environment in classrooms when teaching languages. In EFL teaching of today, it is of great importance that pupils learn to converse in the language. Every pupil needs functional language knowledge that stretches beyond “common tourist spoken English”. A worrying thought is there could be a risk that a sizable number of pupils are likely to leave school with difficulties in expressing themselves in the target language. In today’s society, it is necessary to be able, for example, to receive a telephone call in English and also to be able to give an adequate answer. EFL teaching in school should prepare pupils for such situations, and this should be done by providing as many opportunities as possible for them to practice speaking and, therefore, develop linguistic competence (1995, p 29).

A requirement for the competent use of a language is an understanding of basic grammatical structures, basic vocabulary and comprehensible pronunciation. This is not enough, though. It is just as important to be able to use this knowledge in real life situations. If, from the beginning, students learn to use English as the communication language between themselves in the classroom situation, it probably will not be long before they realize that communication is possible even if they do not have

particularly advanced skills. An important factor during the process of learning a language is to feel secure in the learning environment. If students do not experience a positive atmosphere, there is a risk that they may be unwilling to contribute verbally if they are less than certain they can do so proficiently, for fear of being ridiculed by their classmates (Bergström, 1995).

Many pupils who have difficulties in EFL learning often express that they do not want to learn grammar or spend time on tedious homework. One might then come to the conclusion that these pupils are in need of an English education that is concrete and realistic. It would also be appropriate that these students should be allowed to engage in the parts of language studies that they feel comfortable with, but not be excluded from oral assignments. There are indications that show that students who are weak at languages are basically left out when it comes to speech, either because of the fact that they do not want to show their weaknesses or because the teacher feels it is more humane to leave them alone. This is most unfortunate as it seems that pupils that have difficulties in learning languages need to practice on their verbal skills to a much greater extent than other students, not only to enhance their speech but also for the sake of their personal development (ibid).

4. Method and Performance

As it was important for me, as a teacher, to learn more about whether there is a difference in boys and girls when learning new languages, I decided to use a quantitative research where I would be able to study a larger number of pupils in grade 4. In the Swedish syllabus for the subject English, we can read that pupils in year 4-6 should acquire the learning skills below when it comes to speaking, writing and discussing – production and interaction.

This is what to be read in the Swedish curriculum Lgr-11:

Teaching in English should essentially give pupils the opportunities to develop their ability in:

- *Language phenomena to clarify and enrich communication such as pronunciation and intonation, spelling and punctuation, polite phrases, and other fixed language expressions and grammatical structures.*

Looking at the above, I decided to concentrate on grammatical structures, such as –s on the verb when third person singular, possessive pronouns such as my, your, our etc, and the genitive such as Peter's bike, Molly's apple, as these were new areas introduced to the pupils, and therefore I would be able to evaluate the outcome. Over a period of five weeks, I introduced the above topics, and the pupils worked with oral, as well as written, exercises.

As my study also included listening comprehension, the pupils listened to recorded spoken English twice a week before the tests were carried out.

4.1 Method Selection

Patel and Davidsson explain how and why particular methods should be chosen. Quantitative research means research where measurements are made when collecting data and statistical processing and analysis. Qualitative research is understood to mean research where the data being collected is focused on qualitative interviews and interpretive analysis. Before we decide whether to proceed with quantitative or qualitative research, we need to clarify what it is we want to know and what type of knowledge we are seeking. If we are primarily interested in getting answers for questions such as “Where?”, “How?”, “What are the differences?”, then we should use statistical analytical methods. If the problem, on the other hand, is about interpreting and understanding people’s experiences, to find underlying patterns, then we should use verbal analytical methods (Davidsson & Patel, 2003).

As I am interested in establishing whether there are any differences between boys and girls when it comes to second language acquisition, I have chosen to use quantitative studies.

4.2 Selection

As the time in which to conduct my studies was limited, and I was interested in discovering if there were any differences between boys and girls in the age between 10 – 13 when it comes to learning languages, I decided to undertake my research within the school in which I work, and to do this in a group of 62 grade 4 pupils, divided into two classes. My reason for choosing grade 4 pupils is that they have just recently started to study English as a subject. They have been introduced to the subject in grade three, but have there been focusing on basic phrases in reading and writing, and have not initiated grammar in their studies. Therefore grammar was new to all of the pupils in the study.

4.2:1 Description of Those Included in the Study

The pupils in the study consisted of 23-30 boys and 24-32 girls, depending on how many were in the classroom at the time of the test. They have all read English as a subject since grade 3, except for two girls who came to Sweden a year ago and have recently begun in Swedish schools. These girls have not studied English previously, have some difficulties in understanding Swedish instructions and only participate in one lesson a week; therefore I excluded their results from the study. Three of the girls and two of the boys have certain learning difficulties and have special aid teachers in Swedish and Math. They do not have these teachers in English however, as the special aid teachers in this school do not work with English at all, as they believe it is most important that the pupils in need of special aid know Swedish and Math properly, and therefore concentrate on these subjects. As these pupils participate in all English lessons and are given as much extra help as possible, they are included in the study.

4.3 Procedure

I introduced the new grammatical structures, one at a time, to the pupils. To begin with, I talked about –s being added on verbs in third person singular. I explained the grammatical structure to the pupils, they were given a text where they were instructed to underline all the verbs ending with an –s, and also to whom in the text these verbs were connected. Thereafter, the pupils worked on a paper as described above, corrected it, and had this as homework for the following lesson. They were also told that they would be having a test on this after two lessons. The next lesson was spent working on additional exercises concerning verbs, the pupils being able to get more help if they did not understand and thereafter studying for the test. The last lesson which focused on this section of grammatical structures was partly spent on a test, the results of which are presented further on.

My approach to introduce and teach the following grammatical structures, namely possessive pronouns, the genitive and use of an apostrophe when putting together two words in spoken English, was conducted in a similar manner.

When it came to listening comprehension, the pupils have become accustomed to listening to native English speaking people, by listening to stories followed by questions. They have after this, listened to two short monologues, and then answered questions that have followed the given topic. The first listening comprehension had questions that required a “yes” or a “no” answer. The second one had questions that were to be answered with numbers.

The following paragraph will show how I have processed the collected material and why I have chosen this process.

4.3:1 Material Processing

Having corrected the tests, I have specified the results as to how many had 1 point, 2 points and so on, and this was in order to establish where most of the boys/girls were in terms of points, if most of them were grouped by certain points, or if they were spread out from the lowest score to the highest score. I have looked through the answers several times as to see if there is an understanding of the given question even though the answer is not completely correct. Thereafter, I have made diagrams to show the average results amongst the boys and the girls, so that it is easy to get a quick overview of the results.

4.4 Reliability and Generalizability

To be able to evaluate a study, such as the one that I have completed, would require many more tests, written as well as oral, in order to establish a reliable result. As I did not have the time to conduct the same tests in several other classes, the outcome may be said to be valid for the group that participated in the survey.

As the pupils have been studying for the grammar tests, I do not really know if they have a thorough understanding of the grammatical structures or if their results are based on what they have studied and know for the moment and can just as well be easily forgotten.

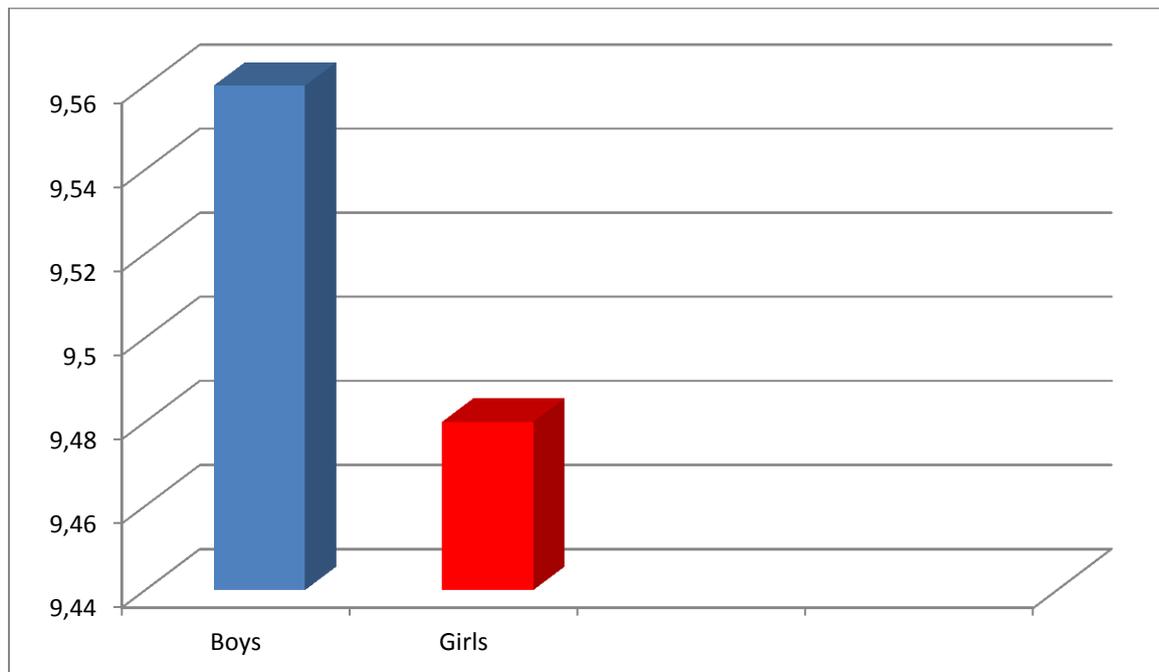
Concerning the listening comprehension, I would say that the result is reliable as the pupils did not have the opportunity to study for the tests and therefore should show what is accurate for the group. However, as above I would not be able to say that the results could represent 10 year olds all over Sweden, as the number of pupils is not sufficient, but they may, nonetheless, be said to be valid for the geographical area where I have conducted the study.

4.5 Ethical considerations

As the boys and girls that are part of the study group are pupils at the school where I am currently employed, they are familiar with me as a teacher. I have explained to them that I am using their tests in my study and that they are anonymous, that is, no names will be published at all. Due to the fact that I am known to the pupils, I have not sent out information to the pupils' parents, which would be customary otherwise. However, I have informed the students that their parents are welcome to contact me should they have any concerns at all.

5. Results and Discussion

Grammar test 1, using –s on third person singular in verbs.



Boys

Points Nr of students

1 1

6 2

7 5

Girls

Points Nr of students

1 1

5 1

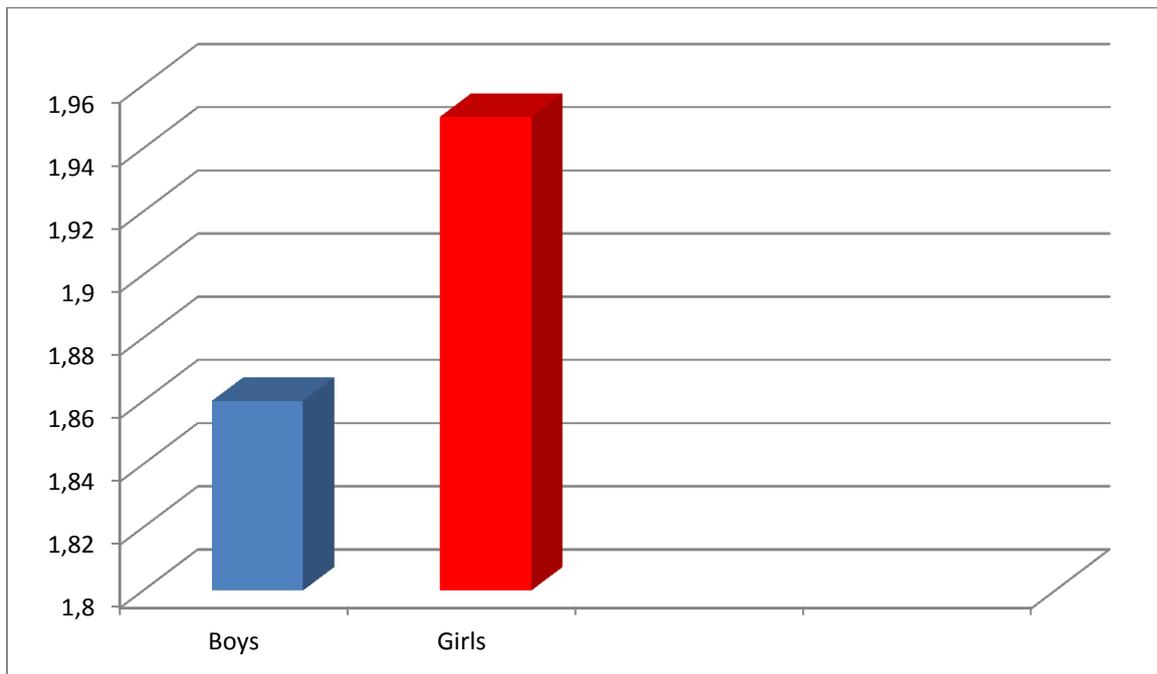
6 3

7 1

		8	5
8	5	9	4
9	1	10	2
10	2	11	1
12	4	12	2
14	2	13	5
15	1	14	1
Average 9,56		15	1
		Average 9,48	

This first grammar test was conducted after the pupils had been working with oral as well as written exercises, for three lessons. The graphs show that the boys had better results than the girls.

Grammar test 2, -s on third person singular in verbs.



Boys

Points	Nr of students
1	11

Girls

Points	Nr of students
1	10

2 3
3 8

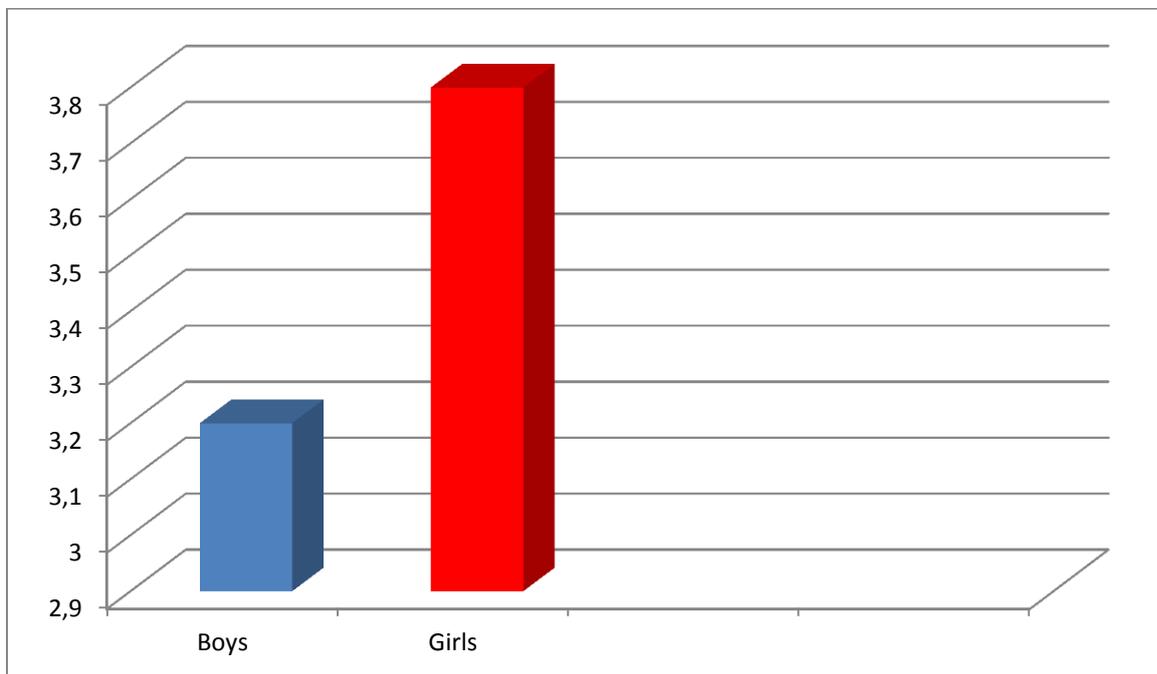
Average: 1,86

2 5
3 9

Average: 1,95

The second grammar test was conducted after two additional lessons concerning the same grammatical structure; using –s on verbs when 3:rd person singular. On this test, the girls showed better results than the boys.

Grammar test 3, possessive pronouns



Boys

Points	Nr of students
0	1
1	2
2	8
3	5
4	1
5	4

Girls

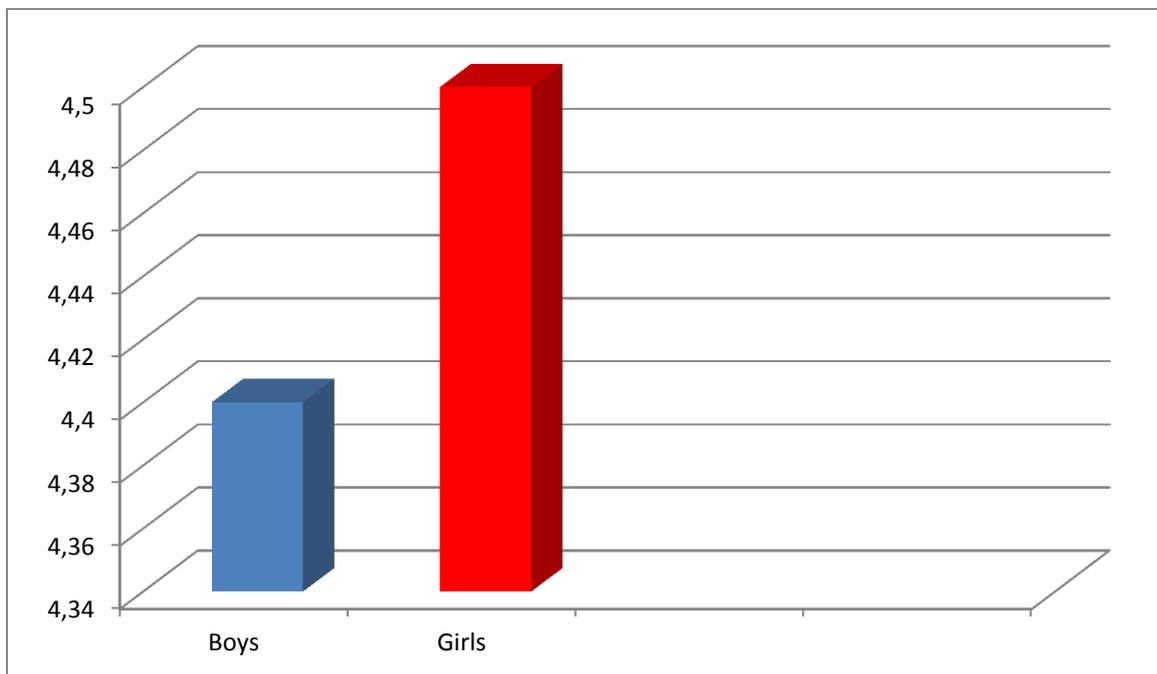
Points	Nr of students
0	1
1	2
2	6
3	5
4	3
6	7

Average: 3,2

Average: 3,8

This grammar test was conducted after the pupils had been working with exercises concerning possessive pronouns for a period of three lessons. The girls showed better results than the boys and also had the largest number of girls on 6 points, whereas the largest number of boys can be seen on 2 points.

Listening comprehension 1



Boys

Points	Nr of students
0	
1	
2	
3	3
4	8
5	9

Girls

Points	Nr of students
0	1
1	
2	1
3	1
4	10
5	11

6 4

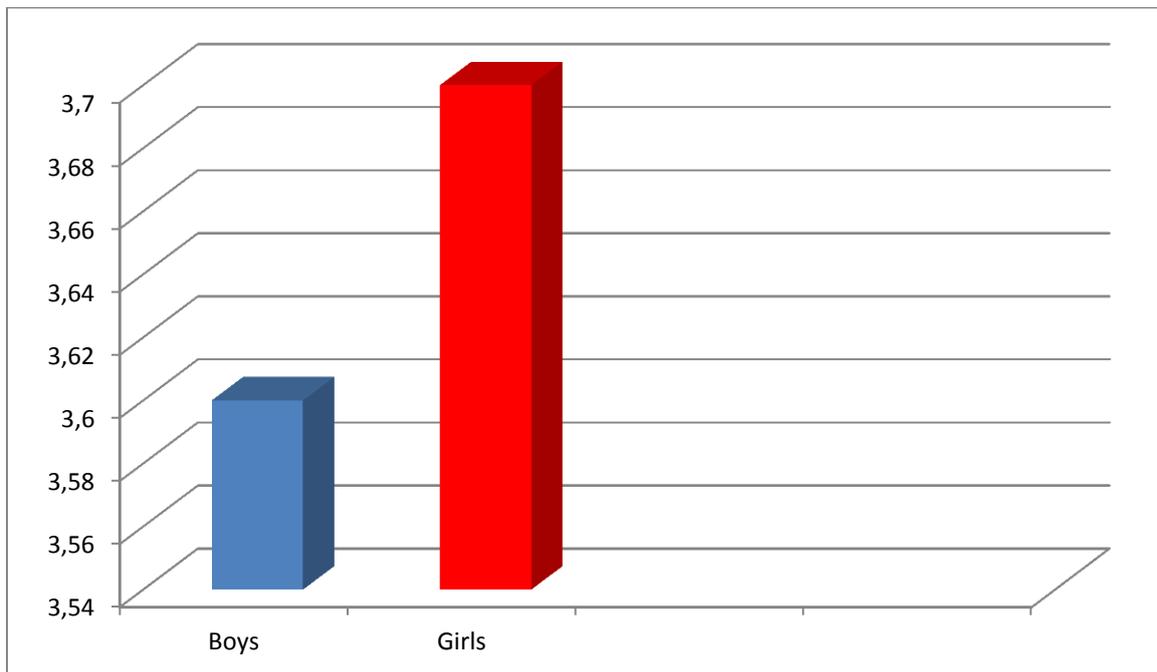
Average: 4,4

6 6

Average: 4,5

The pupils listened twice to the CD. They were allowed to answer the questions while listening the first time, but were given the chance to listen an additional time, as listening comprehension is relatively new to them. Here the girls had a slightly better result than the boys.

Listening comprehension 2



Boys

Points	Nr of students
0	2
1	
2	3
3	5
4	4
5	10

Girls

Points	Nr of students
0	2
1	1
2	2
3	5
4	6
5	11

Average: 3,6

Average: 3,7

Similarly to the previous listening comprehension, the pupils were allowed to listen twice to the CD. Again, the girls showed slightly better results than the boys.

In the next paragraph, I will analyze the above data and try to establish if there are differences between boys and girls concerning learning new areas in grammar, and also if there are differences in listening comprehension.

5.1 Grammatical structures

I will here try to analyze the data above with perspective from Vygotskij's theories on cognitive development, Piaget's theories on knowledge development and Skinner's theory on behaviorism. I will reflect upon various factors that have appeared during my study and try to shed light on why they occur with the help of these theories.

In all the studies except one, girls have shown better results than boys. The differences between the two sexes are quite small, but nevertheless there are slight differences in favor of the girls. Concerning the grammar studies, there have been opportunities for the pupils to study before the test in all cases, which could indicate that girls take their English studies more seriously than boys. It could also indicate that girls have an innate ability to learn languages at an earlier stage than boys, but also that the particular teaching methods employed or acquisition processes to which they are exposed are more suited to girls. However, in the first test, where the boys had a better result than the girls, there were many comments from the pupils that they had forgotten to study. This could then mean that girls need to practice language learning more than boys, and that this usually is the case, as seen in the following studies. Applying Skinner's theory of behaviorism to create an understanding to how children learn, where Skinner speaks of habits by imitation, practice and feedback, this could mean that girls need to imitate and rehearse more frequently to achieve learning in EFL, whereas boys pick up more quickly, but do not practice with the same frequency.

If we look at what Vygotskij had to say about learning processes, he, as mentioned earlier, emphasized the importance of assisting children to use strategies to expand their intellectual capacity. The area between the level of independent performance and the level of assisted performance is what Vygotskij referred to as the "zone of proximal development"; it is within this zone that the teacher must focus attention (Bruner, 1978). Applying this theory would give reason to evaluate and reflect upon the teaching performed in the classrooms. Could there be reason to believe that, unknowingly, the way of

teaching and assisting pupils in this case benefits the girls more than the boys? There were no differences in how the two sexes were taught EFL, but there could exist differences in how boys and girls perceive and transform teaching into knowledge.

Piaget claimed that knowledge is developed in different stages and that one stage must be accomplished before the next can appear, and where children must constantly reconstruct earlier ideas with new information acquired at the next level (Jerlang, 2008). Thought must, in this study, be given to whether the boys and girls are on the same level, and if they have completed their learning at the earlier stage before they have moved on. This discussion is often brought up between teachers as it often creates problems when teaching, namely that pupils move on to the next level without having established their knowledge on the previous level, and thereby gaps are created which are difficult to fill.

5.2 Listening comprehension

Similar to the results on grammatical structures, the girls showed slightly better results than the boys on all of the listening comprehension tests. When looking back at my earlier research, and what has been found in different investigations concerning boys' and girls' language skills, I begin to wonder if there indeed can be a connection between the results in my study and the results that have come forth in the investigations. This could mean that boys need to hear spoken English repeatedly before they fully understand, whereas girls are quicker at picking up the first time. There is not a substantial difference between boys and girls in the study; nevertheless, there is a slight difference that repeatedly occurs, and the question of course remains whether or not the differences would be more significant in a larger study. Could there indeed be benefits to be gained if girls and boys were in gender-separated classes up to seventh grade? Studies in earlier research have shown that girls mature earlier than boys (Fischbein, 2008), which could mean that we, in Swedish schools today are leaving boys behind that are in need of more help and, at the same time, keeping girls behind that could reach higher levels if given the means.

6. Conclusion

My assumption before doing this study was that there were no differences between boys and girls when learning new grammatical structures or listening comprehension in EFL. I also assumed that the research would show some results in favor of the boys and some in favor of the girls. However, this was not the outcome. My assumptions have not been verified. In all studies except one, the girls showed a better result than the boys. As I have mentioned before, the difference is slight, and can of

course be discussed as the number of pupils in the study is not enough to be able to establish a valid result nationwide, but can nevertheless be regarded as a valid result for the geographical area where the study was conducted.

Considering the outcome of the investigation, further thought should be given to whether girls and boys acquire the learning that is most favorable for them. Boys could possibly require more speaking, whereas girls could benefit from reading more. These are just examples of differences that could help pupils improve their learning and, thereby, their school performance and ultimate grades. Further consideration should also be given to whether Swedish educators in EFL have adequate knowledge concerning differences in how boys and girls learn and what type of teaching that would benefit the two genders the most. It is also necessary to take into account what happens in the classroom when teaching EFL, if boys and girls ask questions to the same extent when they do not understand or if more time is devoted to the girls in this matter. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Sweden is not a gender segregated country in society in general, in many aspects and, particularly, the schooling system does not generally approve of separating boys and girls without a compelling reason. Consequently the question is how to address the above problem when having both sexes in the same classroom.

Another factor to consider is whether the material used in teaching is attractive to both boys and girls. Certain topics tend to attract the attention of girls more than boys, and vice versa, which makes this an important factor if educators want to keep pupils focused. An alternative would be to give this some thought, such as when creating work sheets for exercises, to the use of different themes so that pupils can choose according to their interest.

With reference to earlier research in my study, thought should also be directed to whether grammatical structures should be presented as isolated exercises in the classroom. As pupils that are weak at EFL often lose interest when working with grammar, or are handed tedious homework, thought should be given to the question as to whether lessons in EFL would be better spent on communication and oral exercises which would strengthen these pupils' ability to express themselves in an English speaking society.

Summing up, my conclusion is that there are some slight differences between boys and girls when it comes to understanding and being able to use grammatical structures and also being able to understand spoken English, and therefore attention should be given to how to diminish these differences but, above all, the goal should be to provide language comprehension at the level where each student is – regardless of gender.

6.1 Further Research

It would be interesting to read about a similar study which has been conducted with a larger number of students so as to be able to establish whether there are differences between boys and girls when it

comes to learning languages. Further issues that would be interesting to explore would be whether certain language learning material attracts the interest of boys more than girls, or if this is not gender-related factor at all.

Word count: 9 562

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Grammatical structures 1

1. Tom _____ with his friends every day. (play)
2. They _____ food together in the evenings. (eat)
3. I _____ in the pool before I go to school. (swim)
4. We must _____ our homework before we go out. (do)
5. Susan _____ her homework on Mondays. (do)
6. Peter and Tom _____ to town every Saturday. (go)
7. Gemma _____ there too. (go)

Fred _____(live) in Australia. There it is hot in summertime, so before he _____
(go) to school, he _____ (take) a quick dip to cool off. At school he _____(meet) his
friend Alex and they _____(walk) to the classroom together. In the classroom his teacher
_____ (write) on the whiteboard what they are going to do that day. She says “today we will
_____ (look) at a film about Sweden. There it is cold and the children _____ (go) to
school by bus.

My name is: _____

Appendix 2

Grammatical structures 2

play

love

jump

Choose one of the words above and use it correctly in the sentence.

1. I _____ football with my friends every Monday.
2. Peter _____ on his trampoline every day after school.
3. Susanne _____ warm, sunny days when she can go swimming.

Name: _____

Appendix 3

Grammatical Structures 3

Please fill in the missing words:

1. min hund _____ dog
2. din födelsedag _____ birthday
3. deras katt _____ cat
4. hennes bror _____ brother
5. vår nya bil _____ new car

6. hans cykel

_____ bike

Name: _____

Listening comprehension 1

Appendix 4

(the pupils did not have the text on their sheets)



1. Is the woman behind the girl?



2. Is the girl standing next to the heart?



3. Are the books in front of the boy?



4. Is the baby lying underneath the moon?



5. Is the teddy bear on top of the boy?



6. Is the girl in the bathtub?

Name _____

Listening comprehension 2

Appendix 5

(The pupils did not have the text)

I get up very early in the morning. My alarm clock rings already at 2 am, and then I have to get up straight away otherwise I will be late for work.

I have breakfast at 2.30 am. As I have a job where I stand and walk a lot, I need a lot to eat in the morning. I have a big sandwich, a cup of tea and a big plate of cereal. I love my cereal!

After breakfast I take my bike to work where I make bread, buns and other sorts of nice cakes. I use a lot of flour, butter and sugar every day. When I have been working for a few hours, it is time for me to have lunch. This is at 7.00 am. That is when most of you have breakfast!

When I have had lunch it is time to work a few hours more, before I go home at 10.30 am. Then I am very tired and need to go to sleep. Do you know what I work with?

1. Sue gets up at _____

2. She has breakfast at _____

3. She has lunch at _____

4. She goes home at _____

5. Sue works as a _____

Name: _____