Students’ Attitudes and Motivation regarding English Second Language Learning:
A study of the effect of sociolinguistic factors

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate how students think that sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity affect their attitudes and motivation regarding English second language learning in the Swedish upper secondary school. A questionnaire consisting of both qualitative and quantitative questions has been distributed in order to examine students’ attitudes and motivation regarding English second language learning. The data was analysed using a hermeneutic approach. The results show that the influential factors were age, gender and ethnic identity, whereas most of the participants disagreed concerning the influence of one’s social class on language learning. In examining the students’ motivation for English language learning it was found that the majority of the students have a positive attitude due to the status of English as a global language and the possibilities for future employment that a command of English entails. In conclusion, according to the students’ perspectives, sociolinguistic factors do impact on their attitudes and motivation regarding English second language learning at upper secondary school level.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Second Language Learning, Sociolinguistic Factors, Attitude, Motivation

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1. Introduction

Language is an important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people. It is an important means of communicating information (Trudgill, 2000, p. 108). Language is essential to human interaction and it influences the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. As a result of increasing globalization, people are encouraged to acquire additional languages. Saville-Troike (2006, p. 9) states that the most common second language is the English language and when referring to second language in this text, henceforth, it is English that is intended. The English language has become a global language and is therefore used in many areas such as politics, education, and economics (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011, p. 1).

Language learners do not often recall the process of acquiring their first language, but according to Gardner and Lambert (1959), “achievement in a second language is dependent upon essentially the same type of motivation that is apparently necessary for the child to learn his first language” (p. 267). The authors further argue that “an individual acquiring a second language adopts certain behaviour patterns which are characteristic of another cultural group and that his attitudes towards that group will at least partly determine his success in learning the new language” (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, p. 267). Dörnyei (2001, p. 5) explains that the term motivation is frequently used by language teachers when speaking of successful or unsuccessful second language learners. He further claims that even the best learners are not able to achieve any useful language without sufficient motivation (2001, p. 5). Therefore, when learning a second language, it becomes clear to learners that motivation and a positive attitude towards the target language are essential for achieving proficiency in the target language. However, is motivation and a positive learning attitude enough to achieve high levels of language proficiency? Or should we instead be turning our attention to factors that prevent learners from becoming fully proficient in their second language learning?

Ellis (1994, p. 201) presents four social factors which influence the attitudes held by learners, and which affect degrees of second language proficiency, namely, age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity. He also states that,

The general findings are that younger learners do better than older learners […], females outperform males, middle class learners achieve higher levels of academic language proficiency than working class learners, and learners from an ethnic group that is culturally similar to the target language group tend to be more successful than learners from an ethnic group that is culturally distant. (Ellis, 1994, p. 25)
Students in the Swedish upper secondary school are exposed to the English language in several ways in their daily lives. The majority of the students have the opportunity to learn and achieve high levels of English language proficiency. However, it is apparent that their attitudes to and motivation for English language learning differ. Therefore, in a diverse classroom, it is relevant to English subject teachers in the Swedish upper secondary school to identify factors that influence students’ language learning. This study investigates how students think that sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity affect their attitudes and motivation regarding English second language learning in the Swedish upper secondary school. It further examines students’ attitudes and motivation regarding English language learning, and if students think that certain sociolinguistic factors are more influential in second language learning than others.

The first part of this paper presents previous research, aim, research questions, method and theoretical framework. The second and final part presents results, analysis, conclusion, references and appendix.

2. Previous research

To provide a theoretical background for this study and to investigate whether sociolinguistic factors affect second language learning, the process of Second Language Acquisition and its connection to sociolinguistic factors are presented in this section.

2.1 Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Yule (2006) makes a significant distinction between acquisition and learning. He explains that

- The term **acquisition** is used to refer to the gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations with others who know the language.
- The term **learning**, however, applies to a more conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the features, such as vocabulary, of a language, typically in an institutional setting. (2008, p. 163)

In addition, according to Seville-Troike (2006), SLA “refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children” (p. 2). The first language one learns when one is a child is called one’s first language (L1). The second language is an additional, acquired language (L2). The third, fourth or tenth acquired language are similarly referred to as one’s second language (Seville-Troike, 2006, p. 2).
2.2 Sociolinguistic Factors and Second Language Acquisition

The process of second language acquisition can be influenced by several factors. These factors include the context in which a second language is learnt, the motivation for learning, the age of the learner as well as the social and linguistic background of the learner (Kootstra, Dijkstra, & Starren, 2015, p. 349). Ellis (1994, p. 201) discusses the four social factors that have received the most attention in SLA research, which are essential for a person’s degree of success in becoming a proficient L2 user. These social factors are age, sex, social class, and ethnic identity. Moreover, Ellis (1994, p. 201) emphasises that these factors interact in many complex ways and that it is therefore difficult to single out one specific factor’s influence on L2 learning.

It should be recognized that it is not age, sex, social class, or ethnic identity that determine L2 proficiency, but rather the social conditions and attitudes associated with these variables. Also, the factors interact among themselves, and their effect on learning depends to a large extent on the setting. Any conclusions, therefore, need to be cautious. (Ellis, 1994, p. 211)

2.2.1 Age

In many studies examining second language acquisition, the question of whether age affects L2 learning and, if so, how has been discussed for several decades. In second language learning, one of the most important affective factors is age (Bista, 2008, p. 2). Lightbown and Spada (2013, p. 38) discuss the amount of time the different age groups devote to second language learning. They found that young learners are often exposed to a second language in various ways and for several hours a day through songs, games, television, in playgrounds, or in more formal settings such as the classroom. Older learners, on the other hand, tend to be less exposed to the second language, since they are only in contact with the language in limited situations or in more formal situations such as the classroom. Furthermore, Lightbown and Spada (2013, p. 93) claim that older learners depend on more general learning abilities when they want to acquire new skills or information. However, these are not as effective for language learning as the more innate capacities that are accessible for younger learners. The authors explain that young learners are more involved in informal language learning environments, where they have more time to acquire a new language. Young learners are not as pressured as older learners to speak accurately or fluently from the very beginning of their language learning. Their imperfect efforts are also more accepted and praised because of their early exposure to the language, whereas older learners frequently find themselves in positions where more complex language expressions and concepts are required of them. These demands put the older learners in uncomfortable situations that make them feel ashamed and frustrated about their newly developed language skills. These are all factors that affect their motivation and willingness to
engage in situations where they attempt to use their newly acquired language, according to Lightbown & Spada (2013, p. 93).

Additionally, Saville-Troike (2006, p. 83-84) claims that adult and younger learners have different advantages of achieving high levels of L2 proficiency. While young learners have the benefit of brain plasticity and are more adaptable to developing native-like grammatical intuition, older learners have better analytic abilities, vocabulary memory, grammatical and pragmatic skills, and better knowledge of their L1 (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 83-84). Adult learners are more efficient and effective second language learners than younger learners because of their metalinguistic knowledge, memory strategies, and problem-solving abilities. Young learners do not necessarily achieve greater second language proficiency because of their early exposure to the language, according to results presented in Lightbown & Spada (2013, p. 93).

2.2.2 Ethnic identity
Ethnic identity is one of the four social factors Ellis (1994, p. 201) mentions as relevant for L2 proficiency. Ethnicity is defined as the fact of belonging to a particular group in terms of culture, practices, beliefs and/or religion (Ethnicity, 2018). According to Trofimovich & Turuséva (2015), “[e]thnic identity refers to the subjective experience embracing the feelings, experiences, and behaviours through which people position their membership in a single or multiple ethnic groups” (p. 234). Ellis (1994, p. 207) states that the relationship between the ethnic group and the target language has a great impact on L2 learning. High achievement levels can be acquired if the cultures of the native and the target language are close, whereas a large distance between the cultures of the native and the target language will make second language learning difficult for the learner. Ellis (1994) further discusses that “[t]he attitudes that learners hold towards the learning of a particular L2 reflect the intersection of their views about their own ethnic identity and those about the target-language culture. These views will influence both L2 and L1 learning” (p. 207). Also, “a learner’s imagined identity and hopes for the future will impact his or her investment in the language” (Norton, 2016, p. 477).

2.2.3 Gender
It is relevant to make a distinction between the two concepts ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in language studies. Ellis (1994, p. 202) defines that the term ‘sex’ constitutes a biological distinction, while the term ‘gender’ constitutes a social construction. For the purpose of this study, the term gender will be used.
Trudgill (1983a; cited in Mesthrie, 2000, pp. 218-219) argues that because women are more status-conscious, they are more likely to use prestigious speech forms compared to men. Trudgill (1991; cited in Ellis, 1994) clarifies two contradictory principles “1. In stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of non-standard forms than women. 2. In the majority of linguistic changes, women use a higher frequency of the incoming forms than men” (p. 202). According to Ellis

Women, therefore, nearly always outstrip males in the standardness of their speech and use of prestige forms, and yet they also tend to be in the forefront of linguistic change. Both principles suggest that women might be better at L2 learning than men; they are likely to be more open to new linguistic forms in the L2 input and they will be more likely to rid themselves of interlanguage forms that deviate from target-language norms. (1994, p. 202)

Ellis (1994, p. 203) further discusses that women’s attitudes to second language learning are more positive. Additionally, in a British study of second-year L2 learners, Batters (1986; cited in Catalán, 2010, p. 8) found that girls’ attitudes toward classroom activities varies from those of boys. The girls in the classroom were more engaged in the English subject and had a greater desire to communicate with native speakers compared to the boys. On the other hand, the boys were more interested in and engaged in L2 speaking tasks (Catalán, 2010, p. 8).

2.2.4 Social class

Social class signifies one's level of education, occupation, and income. Ellis (1994, p. 205) distinguishes four groups; the lower class, the working class, the lower middle class and the upper middle class.

Studies presented in Ellis (1994, p. 205) have shown that children from the middle-class often outperform children from the lower and working classes in second language learning. Ellis (1994, p. 205) also discovered class-related differences in the learners’ attitudes, in the sense that middle-class children continued their L2 learning, while working-class children tended to drop their L2 learning after the second year in secondary school. Ellis explains that

The results to date suggest that middle-class children achieve higher levels of L2 proficiency and more positive attitudes than working-class children when the programme emphasizes formal language learning. This may be because they are better able to deal with decontextualized language. However, when the programme emphasizes communicative language skills, the social class of the learners has no effect. (1994, p. 206)
Previous research demonstrates that the aforementioned factors have an impact on the extent to which a learner is likely to achieve a high level of second language proficiency. However, some of these factors seem to be more influential than others. Previous research has provided information regarding how these variables affect language proficiency, but they have provided very limited research on individual motivations and attitudes towards L2 learning. Therefore, the focus of this essay will be on how these variables affect students’ attitudes and motivation regarding English second language learning.

3. Aim and Research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate how students think that sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity affect their attitudes and motivation regarding English second language learning in the Swedish upper secondary school. More specifically, the following questions will be examined:

1. What are upper secondary school students’ attitudes and motivation towards English second language learning?
2. Do students think that certain sociolinguistic factors are more influential in second language learning than others?

4. Method

The method, structure and material used for this research paper will be presented and discussed in this section.

In the first part of this study, a presentation of previous studies was given to provide a theoretical background for the chosen field of study. In the second part, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used for determining whether sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender, social class, and ethnic identity affect the students’ attitudes to and motivation for English language learning. This mixed method approach consisted of a questionnaire with open-ended as well as closed-ended questions aimed for a group of students at a Swedish upper secondary school. According to Peltomaki and Nummela (2006; cited in McKim, 2015), “studies that use a mixed methods approach gain a deeper, broader understanding of the phenomenon than studies that do not utilize both a quantitative and qualitative approach” (p. 203).
The informant groups and settings were chosen using a convenience sample. Permission to share the web page for the online questionnaire in classes was obtained from the responsible teachers. All informants were assured anonymity and participated voluntarily. Furthermore, the online questionnaire was given in the researcher’s presence to be available for the students if they had questions about the questionnaire or the study. 52 students from year one and year three participated in the study. The classes had different English teachers; year one had a male teacher while year three had a female teacher. Although age is also likely to be a distinguishing factor in the teacher group, this will not be examined in this study due to time limitations. However, this could be an interesting topic for future studies.

The questionnaire covered ten questions and three statements. The prominent types of questions asked were personal factual questions and questions about attitudes, beliefs, normative standards and values (Bryman, 2012, p. 253). According to Wilson (2013), questionnaires have both strengths and weaknesses that one should consider (p. 12). One of the advantages of using a questionnaire is that it is more anonymous compared to face-to-face interviews. Moreover, a standardized questionnaire enables the researcher to compare responses among several groups. One of the weaknesses, however, is that online surveys are not as flexible as interviews where you can ask follow-up questions (Wilson, 2013, p. 13).

Google forms (Google, n.d.) was used to assemble the data and one of the difficulties encountered was that a couple of participants responded in Swedish even though they were told to answer in English. The results were not always precise; when the students were asked to state their first language, some replied Svenska instead of Swedish. Therefore, the digital tool classified 'Svenska' as an additional language and not equivalent to ‘Swedish’. However, the fact that some of the participants responded in Swedish may indicate some of the attitudes the students hold towards the English language.

5. Theoretical Framework

The hermeneutic approach was used in this research paper to analyse the collected data. Hermeneutics is defined as rules for the interpretation of Scripture from the Reformation to the early nineteenth century (Thiselton, 2009, p. 2). Thiselton (2009) clarifies that hermeneutics examines how one reads, understands and handles texts, especially texts written in a different time or in a context of life distinct from our own (p. 1). He further states that the idea that hermeneutics is an art rather than science emerged in the nineteenth century with Schleiermacher and in the later twentieth century with Gadamer. In 1819, Schleiermacher wrote that “[h]ermeneutics is part of the
art of thinking, and is therefore philosophical” (cited in Thiselton, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, according to Ödman (1979), “the hermeneutic tradition in natural science focuses on understanding the world – that is, it focuses on establishing meaning and interpretation” (in Age, 2011). Within the hermeneutic tradition, Ödman identified three forms of interpretation

(1) Elementary interpretation (which refers to everyday interpretations during daily activities); (2) narrative interpretation (which involves a higher level of abstraction in the process of interpretation); and (3) scientific interpretation (which is a more abstract interpretation made by a researcher), are more formal than the other two types of interpretation, and usually incorporates a broader span incidents. (Ödman, 1979; cited in Age, 2011, p. 1605)

Additionally, according to Bryman (2012, p. 712), when hermeneutics is imported into social science, it is concerned with the theory and method of the interpretation of human nature. He states that “the central idea of hermeneutics is that the analyst of a text must seek to bring out the meanings of a text from the perspective of its author. This will entail attention to the social and historical context within which the text was produced” (2012, p. 560). Therefore, the hermeneutic approach, in this research paper, will be employed in order to bring out the meaning from the perspective of the participants. The students’ social-cultural context will be taken into consideration when analysing the data to interpret their attitudes to and motivation for second language learning.

6. Results and analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires will be examined and analysed in this section. The figures represent all the students who participated in this study. Additionally, more detailed figures that allow for a comparison of age and gender will be included. The results will only focus on findings that are relevant to addressing the research aims.
Figure 1 illustrates the students’ answers when asked to state their gender.

**Figure 1. Gender of the participants**
In Figure 1 the colour red represents the percentage of female participants, 59.6 %, while the colour blue represents the percentage of male participants, 40.4 %. The results from the questionnaire have a higher representation of female perspectives in comparison to male perspectives, since there are more female than male participants.

Figure 2 shows the age of all the students who participated in the study. The students were asked to state their age.

**Figure 2. Age of the participants**
The participants are freshmen (year one) and seniors (year three) at a Swedish upper secondary school. All the participants are between the ages of 15 and 19. The average age of the 27 participants in year one is 16, while the average age of the 25 participants in year three is 18 (Figure 2). The data collected allows for the comparison of age in relation to attitudes.
What motivates/inspires you to learn English? Why do you think it is important to learn English? What do you enjoy about your English classes?

These questions were asked to identify the students’ attitudes to and motivation for English second language learning, and since they are connected, all three of them are presented and discussed in this section. Through the analysis of the data, the following words and concepts were in sight when analysing the participants’ answers: global language, communication, social media, online gaming, career, and jobs. These were important to the analysis and contributed to the subsequent discussion.

The majority of the students participating in the study have a positive attitude to learning English as a second language. They enjoy their English lessons, especially when practising speaking, reading and vocabulary acquisition. Nearly all the students are motivated and inspired to learn because they believe that the English language is a global language. They further expressed that it is essential to learn English for the ease of communication, travelling, media, education and further job opportunities. A female freshman student sums up the answers given to the questions concerning motivation:

To make it easier to communicate with people from different cultures, countries and religions. I think it is important that we have an open mind to everyone and that we have the possibility to talk to people in order to make it easier to accept all human beings.

However, a few did not agree, as indicated in the following expression given by a female freshman student: “I hate, English because I have really hard [sic] to learn it. But I needed a good grade in that to. to [sic] come in on this program. And that is my chance to get my dream work”. This is an interesting argument, since it proves how influential the English language has become in recent years, and even though it provides students with opportunities, it appears to limit other’. A few students from year one and year three answered the questionnaire in Swedish instead of English, as they were instructed. Their answers in Swedish could indicate that they cannot express their thoughts or are anxious about using the English language.

The increasing globalization in the modern world encourages students to learn the English language, and the majority of the participants in this study are conscious about the relevance of acquiring a second, third or fourth language to be able to communicate with people around the world. However, the English language emerges as the language that connects people as articulated in the following statement given by a male senior student:
Interacting with the rest of the world. The “language of the internet” is mainly considered to be English so if I wanted to, for example, play an online game with other people then the only link connecting us together would be the English language.

Finally, nearly all the participants believe that motivation is the key factor for second language learning. If one is motivated and willing to learn a new language, social factors cannot prevent one from achieving high levels of language proficiency. Moreover, as stated in the first part of this study, it is the students’ social conditions and attitudes associated with these variables that determine L2 proficiency, and not age, gender, social class or ethnic identity (Ellis, 1994, p. 211).

How do you think people’s background (culture/religion/beliefs etc.) have an impact on second language learning? What is your first language? What other languages do you speak? These questions were asked to investigate whether students believe that a person’s ethnic identity influences second language learning. Through the analysis of the data, the following words and concepts were in sight when analysing the participants’ answers: culture, social background, surroundings, motivation, and beliefs. These were important to the analysis and contributed to the subsequent discussion.

The majority of the students suggested that a person’s social background has a great impact on second language learning, especially one’s cultural background. They argued that one’s family, beliefs, social background, environment, contact with the society they live in, and how ‘open’ one is to other cultures play a major role when learning a second language. A few students argued that these factors are not influential in comparison to motivation, yet, their answers are contradictory, since their answers reveal that it is due to these factors that a person is not motivated or engaged in learning a second language. This is demonstrated in the following statement given by a male senior student,

I don’t think that things like religion and culture have a big impact on the persons [sic] ability to learn languages. However, beliefs may play a bigger role, because if you think that your language is superior to others you wont [sic] learn any others. Although the biggest impact on learning languages is the surroundings. For example the parents, internet, friends and the teachers [sic] ability to interest a student to learn new languages. Thus I think “background” as you have stated plays a minor role.
The answer articulated by the male senior above opposes the statement given, since he mentions that one’s surroundings, which are a part of one’s culture and social background, are significant for language learning. Similarly, a male freshman expresses: “I don’t think it makes a difference. I think it’s more individually.” Once again, a student explains that one’s social background does not have an impact on second language learning. Nevertheless, it is individual, which suggests it depends on one’s circumstances. Few students strongly disagreed with the question that people’s background have an impact on second language learning as in the following statement given by a female freshman student: “I don’t think it has an impact. If you want to learn a second language, than[sic] there is nothing, that could [sic]stop you (own experience).”

Figure 1 shows the participants’ answers when they were asked to state their first language.

![Pie chart showing first languages](image)

**Figure 3. The students’ First Language**

Figure 3 shows that Swedish is the L1 of the majority of the students. A few students stated their L1 as being Polish, Arabic, Hungarian, Persian, Dari or Kirundi (Figure 3).
The students were also asked to state what other languages they speak. Their answers are illustrated in Figure 4.

![Graph showing languages spoken by students](image)

**Figure 4. The students’ Second Language**

Figure 4 shows that 51 out of 52 of the students' have English as their second language, and then comes Spanish, French and German as the other popular languages amongst the students.

As previously stated, the hermeneutic approach suggests that “the analyst of a text must seek to bring out the meaning of a text from the perspective of its author. This will entail attention to the social context within which the text was produced” (Bryman, 2012, p. 560). Therefore, due to globalization, the students are surrounded by diverse cultures on a daily basis. It is through this exposure that one may become more interested in wanting to learn a new language. The constant subjection to a variety of cultures and languages in their day to day lives subconsciously affects their attitude towards language learning in a positive way. Therefore, one could make the assumption that learning a second, third or fourth language is popular amongst the students and the culture they live in. Figure 3 illustrates that Swedish is the L1 for almost all the participants. The second most popular language amongst the students is English, then comes Spanish, French and German (Figure 4). Therefore, from the collected data, one could assume that the reason the participants think that one’s social background has an impact on second language learning is because these students live in a society that encourages and provides them with a positive attitude towards learning new languages.

**How much do you agree with the three following statements**

The questionnaire covered three statements concerning sociolinguistic factors’ effect on second language learning. Also, as previously stated, when referring to second language in this text, henceforth, it is English that is intended. In each one of the three statements the participants were
asked to state whether they strongly agree, disagree, are neutral, agree or strongly disagree with the presented statements. The statements combined with the questions in the questionnaire were used to examine if the students think that certain sociolinguistic factors are more influential in second language learning than others.

The first statement asked the students if it is easier to learn a second language when one is young. This question was asked to investigate if the students believe age has an impact on second language learning.

“It is easier to learn a second language when you are young”

Figure 5. Impact of age
The participants believe that learning a second language when one is young is easier. Figure 5 shows that 42.3% strongly agree with the statement, 46.2% agree and 11.5% are neutral.

Figure 5 depicts the collective answers from all the participants. In order to more specifically make a comparison between age and gender, Figure 6 was created.

Figure 6. Distribution according to age and gender
Figure 6 shows that most of the male participants agree or strongly agree while only a few are neutral to the statement. Similarly, when examining the responses from the female participants, the figure displays that a high number of all the female participants agree or strongly agree while only a few are neutral. Furthermore, the age discrepancies illustrated in Figure 6 show that the participants have a common attitude to the statement given. Therefore, regardless of age and gender, the figure shows that a great number of the students believe that it is easier to learn a second language when one is young (Figure 6).

The second statement asked the students to state if it is easier to learn a second language when one is rich. This question was asked to investigate if the students believe that one’s economic status affects second language learning.

“It is easier to learn a second language when you are rich”

52 responses

Figure 7. Impact of social class

Figure 7 illustrates the mixed attitudes the students hold towards learning a second language when one is rich. The results show that 15.4% strongly disagree, 26.9% disagree, 36.5% are neutral and 21.2% agree. A large proportion of the students disagree with the statement and one could argue that this is possibly because they believe that children and adults in Sweden have equal educational opportunities, regardless of their financial status. It is also known that all residents from a country of the EU/EEA or Switzerland are eligible to study for free in Sweden (Haapasaari, 2018). However, since 21.2% of the participants seem to agree with the statement, these students could have made the assumption that with a good economic standing one could hire a private tutor or travel to a native speaking country to enhance second language abilities.
Figure 7 depicts the collective answers from all the participants. In order to more specifically make a comparison between age and gender, Figure 8 was created.

![Chart showing "It is easier to learn a second language when you are rich"

Figure 8. Distribution according to age and gender

Figure 8 shows that a high number of the students are neutral to the statement that it is easier to learn a second language when one is rich. While a great number of the female participants disagree, a high number of the male participants agree. A comparison of age discrepancies identifies that the freshmen male students are mostly neutral or agree with the statement, while many of the freshmen female students disagree or strongly disagree. Similarly, the male seniors are neutral or in agreement with the statement, while the female seniors disagree. The results show that female students disagree to the fact that one’s financial status is significant for learning a second language. One could assume that the girls have a positive attitude to second language learning and therefore do not believe that a person’s financial status is relevant. As stated earlier, women’s attitudes to second language learning are suggested to be more positive which could be the case here (Ellis, 1994, p. 203). In addition, a British study presented earlier in this paper, also found that girls are more engaged in the English subject compared to boys (Batters, 1986 in Cataán, 2010, p. 8).
The third statement was asked to investigate whether the students think that men are better second language learners than women.

“Men are better second language learners than women”

51 responses

Figure 9. Impact of gender

Figure 9 shows that most of the participants disagree with the statement that men are better second language learners than women. 60.8% strongly disagree, 31.4% disagree and a few are neutral or strongly agree. The figure illustrates that the majority of the students who participated in the study do not believe that gender has an impact on second language learning.

Figure 9 depicts the collective answers from all the participants. In order to more specifically make a comparison between age and gender, Figure 10 was created.

Figure 10. Distribution according to age and gender
Figure 10 shows that most of the male students disagree, while a great number of the female students strongly disagree with the statement that men are better second language learners than women. Examining the overall results from the students, it is apparent that nearly all the students disagree or strongly disagree while a few are neutral. Figure 10 illustrates that it is mostly the senior male participants who are neutral, while the majority of the freshmen males disagree with the statement given. An interesting result is the diverse answers given by the male seniors and the male freshmen participants. One could assume that male seniors are more cautious when expressing themselves in matters that involve gender differences. For future studies, it would be interesting to investigate why the answers between male seniors and male freshmen differ, however, due to time limitations, this matter was not examined in this study.

The three statements were given to identify how the students’ attitudes relate to issues involving sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender and social class. The students at the Swedish upper secondary school where this study was carried out have mutual thoughts concerning these statements, as previously illustrated in the figures. The first statement concerning age: “It is easier to learn a second language when you are young”, emerges as the sociolinguistic factor perceived to be most influential, since the majority of the students reported that age affects second language learning. The second statement concerning social class: “It is easier to learn a second language when you are rich”, diverged from the other two statements. The students were in disagreement as the majority of the female participants stated they disagree, and a great number of the male participants stated they agree. Additionally, there were diverse opinions between the age groups. The majority of the students disagree or strongly disagree with the third statement concerning gender: “Men are better language learners than women”.
7. Conclusion

This final section presents the findings of this study in accordance with the order of the research questions. In addition, issues regarding interpretation and suggestions for further research will also be discussed in this section.

The collected data, together with previous research reveal that sociolinguistic factors do have an impact on the students’ attitudes and motivation regarding English second language learning at the Swedish upper secondary school level. The results answer the first research question in this study; what are upper secondary school students’ attitudes and motivation towards English second language learning? The answers given by the majority of the students revealed that they have a positive learning attitude towards the English language due to its status as a global language and the possibilities for future employment. The majority of the students are engaged in their English lessons since many of them believe that motivation is the key factor for acquiring a new language.

The collected data also answered the second research question; do students think that certain sociolinguistic factors are more influential in second language learning than others? The social factors considered to be most influential are age and ethnic identity, while social class is thought to be nearly as influential and gender the least influential. There were diverse opinions between male and female participants concerning social class, while the male participants agreed that it is easier to learn a second language when one is rich, the female participants disagreed with the statement.

The results of this research paper rely on the participants’ own interpretation of the questions asked in the questionnaire to investigate the aim and research questions of this study. Therefore, it should be taken into consideration that the students interpret the questions and the statements in the questionnaire differently. For example the definition of what it means to be rich in the statement; *is it easier to learn a second language when you are rich?* The questions and statements in the questionnaire could have been explained further to achieve more accurate results. Furthermore, due to time limitations, the questionnaire was only distributed to students studying at the same school. The questionnaire could have been distributed to students from different schools and provinces to gain a wider perspective on the study and to create more accurate data. Finally, for possible future research, it could be interesting to investigate if language teachers believe that sociolinguistic factors affect students’ second language learning.
This research has contributed to the field of education through examining various social factors and motivations of students in English second language learning in a Swedish upper secondary context. This will aid current and future educators to be more effective in their teaching practices.
8. References


9. Appendix

- Male
- Female
- Undisclosed

Age: ____

What province (Län) do you live in?______________________________

Which program are you attending in school?________________________

What is your first language?______________________________________

What other languages do you speak?_______________________________

How do you think people’s background (culture/religion/beliefs etc.) have an impact on second language learning?

__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________

How much do you agree with the three following statements:

“It is easier to learn a second language when you are young”

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

“It is easier to learn a second language when you are rich”

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree
“Men are better second language learners than women”

- Strongly Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Somewhat Agree
- Strongly Agree

What inspires/motivates you to learn English?
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

Why do you think it is important to learn English?
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________

What do you enjoy about your English classes?
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________