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*School of Education and  
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# **Newly arrived students in English education:**

A study of difficulties encountered by students learning English as an L3

Shadan Ali

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Supervisor: Julia Backelin Forsberg

Examiner: Annika Denke

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulties newly arrived students encounter when they learn English, both from the perspective of students and of teachers, and how these difficulties materialise in the classroom. The study was carried out through interviews with teachers and newly arrived immigrant students on the language introductory program at an upper secondary school. Interviews were used to investigate teachers' and students' experiences and attitudes. The results show that the most significant difficulties the students encounter occur in connection with listening comprehension, and these appear when the students are tested in hearing comprehension. Important factors that influence students' listening skills are, among other things, that the students learn two languages simultaneously, and also that they have not developed strategies for listening comprehension. It also emerged that both teachers and students use tools such as pictures in order to facilitate learning. Students also use Google to translate, to some extent. When examining both teachers' and students' responses, it was revealed that they have a negative attitude to learning Swedish and English simultaneously. This is explained by the fact that they lose focus, and everything becomes confusing. In conclusion, the result shows that there are no advantages of having the newly arrived students learn two languages at the same time. According to the participating teachers, the students must be well-grounded in the Swedish language before they start with English.

**Keywords:** Newly arrived students, Learning English as a third language, Difficulties in language learning, Learning strategies, Learning two languages simultaneously

**Number of pages: 33**

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## 1. Introduction

Scholars working in the language learning field have argued that the acquisition of a third language (L3) is a process fundamentally different from the acquisition of a second language (L2). Nevertheless, some still tend to underestimate or even ignore the differences between L2 and L3 acquisition (Henry, 2011, p. 235). L2 acquisition refers to the learning of a language which is not your native language (Jessner, 2008, p. 19). An example would be students who have a mother tongue other than Swedish as their native language and are acquiring Swedish as their second language. L3 acquisition refers to the learning of a non-native language by learners who have already acquired or are acquiring a first and a second language. This is the type of language learning that newly arrived students encounter while learning English in Sweden (Cenoz, 2003, p. 71).

In today's English classroom in Sweden, there is a variety of students who are at different levels of knowledge and thus learn in different ways. There are students in the classes with many different experiences and backgrounds, for example students who are newly arrived immigrants in Sweden and who learn English and Swedish simultaneously. It is worth noting that while managing to learn two new languages at the same time is a great challenge, many people nonetheless succeed. One difficulty for the newly arrived students, however, can be that the teacher sometimes gives instructions and explanations in Swedish during an English lesson, which leads to problems for students who do not understand Swedish. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2011), the teacher must be able to engage each student at an individual level, which places high demands on the teachers' professionalism and flexibility. The Swedish school must be a school for everyone, and the education must be the same for everyone (Skolverket, 2011, p. 2). The guidelines in the curriculum for upper secondary school mention that the teacher should pay attention to and support students who need further adjustments or exceptional support. The teachers should start from the students' needs and circumstances and organize and carry out the work in such a way each student develops according to their conditions (Skolverket, 2011, p. 4).

Studies that have previously been carried out in this area have focused on English as an L2. This study focuses on the problems of learning English as L3 and aims to emphasize both students' and teachers' perspectives. Furthermore, it concerns how teachers of English teach newly arrived immigrants in Sweden, and what challenges and advantages there are

in learning two languages simultaneously. This area is barely examined in relation to the newly arrived immigrants learning English in Sweden. Therefore, my hope is that this study can contribute to useful knowledge in this area.

## **2. Background**

To provide a theoretical background for this study and to investigate which factors influence third language learning, the respective processes of second and third language acquisition are presented in this section.

There is little previous research that shows how a teacher can go about dealing with difficulties that exist in the language development of newly arrived immigrants. Bunar (2010) illustrates the scarcity of studies that investigate newly arrived students' language learning and language development (p.75). Since this area of research is new, more research is needed in order to discern difficulties encountered by newly arrived students when they learn English as a third language in the Swedish school. And also to find solutions that can facilitate language learning. Only limited research has been carried out to identify some of the challenges and difficulties that students face when they learn English as a third language (Amaro, Flynn & Rothman, 2012, p.1). There is much previous research on L2 English, but English as an L3 has not been examined as much. There is also a big difference between learning an L3 as an adult and as a child. According to Yule (2017), it is easier for a child to learn a new language than it is for a teenager at the upper secondary level (p. 209).

Studying English at the Swedish upper secondary school requires that the students understand the Swedish language, since some teacher use this at their language of instruction. There may be several reasons why teachers choose to use Swedish. Some teachers use it because they want to make sure that the students understand what is said and that everyone gets the same conditions in their learning. Another reason why teachers use their first language is that it happens entirely routinely, without any direct or educational explanation (Cook, 2001, p. 402). However, there is a risk involved here, since students who do not understand Swedish are likely to feel more pressure if Swedish is used,

which may lead to a decrease in interest and motivation for language and thus failure (Cook, 2001, p. 407).

What follows below in the sub-headings is information and previous research on language learning, strategies, and guidelines for the language introduction at the upper secondary school. This information is given to facilitate and to provide an understanding of the background and the results of the study.

## ***2.1 Immigrants and language learning***

Jessner (2008) accounts for what multilingualism means and what is needed to be multilingual. She uses different terms for multilingualism, including bilingualism (i.e. speaking two languages fluently) and trilingualism (i.e. speaking three languages fluently) (p.22). Furthermore, Jessner uses the model outlined in Table 1 to describe factors that influence the learning of a third language. The model includes initial stages of language acquisition.

Table 1 shows factors that affect L3 learning.

<b>Neurophysiological Factors</b>	Age and language acquisition capability.
<b>Learner External Factors</b>	Learning environment, learning traditions, and amount of input.
<b>Affective Factors</b>	Motivation, anxiety, and individual life experiences.
<b>Cognitive Factors</b>	Awareness of languages, metalinguistic learning strategies, and individual learning experiences.
<b>Foreign specific-Language Factors</b>	Individual foreign language learning experiences and strategies.
<b>Linguistic Factors</b>	L1 and L2

*Table 1 Factors that affect L3 learning (from Jessner, 2008, p. 23)*

The table shows factors that affect L3 learning. These factors are stages that control or affect the language learning process. According to this model, students who have learned an FL or L2 earlier can learn an L3 more easily, since the student has, through previous experiences of language learning, learned strategies that can facilitate language learning.

Furthermore, Jessner suggests that it is easier to learn an L3 than to learn an L2. While L2 learners are complete beginners in the learning process, L3 learners are already familiar with the language learning process and have developed specific techniques and strategies for learning a new language. Moreover, the students have gained knowledge of their own learning styles. The new strategies that the student has gained in L2 learning becomes support for their L3, which means that those who learn a third language have access to knowledge and competence that L2 learners do not (Jessner, 2008, pp. 23-24). The group of factors comprises “foreign language-specific factors” which English teachers should be aware of, according to Pedersen (2016). These foreign language particular factors comprise experiences and knowledge increased by the learners when they learn the second language, which will affect the development of a third language (Pedersen, 2016, p.11).

There are also factors such as motivation and anxiety, which are called affective factors because they are connected with the emotions and attitudes of the individual language learners. L2 learners usually do not have any previous experience of language learning strategies, which means that they can be more anxious to speak in the target language because of their fear of making errors. The motivation of the students to learn the target language has an impact on the language learning process, as it influences the students’ achievement of the target language. What differs in the motivation of an L3 and an L2 is that L3 students can be more motivated due to having previously learned a new language. What can be harder about learning an L2 compared to an L3, however, is that an L2 student can only compare the target language to their L1 to find similarities and differences, while an L3 student has an additional language from which to draw similarities and differences. According to Pedersen, the different factors can interact with each other, so the learning situation will be affected if one factor changes. An example of this may be if an L3 learner has not developed a high level of competence in L2; this can affect the acquisition process for L3 (Pedersen, 2016, p.11).

Thomas and Collier (1997) have done a study in American schools focusing on students with a mother tongue other than English. The results of the study show that the students' development in English and their school progress depended on how much access they had to their mother tongue. Students aged 9 who had received 2-5 years of schooling in their mother tongue were found to need about six years to catch up with the other students. Furthermore, it also emerged that the students who were born in America and had another mother tongue but never received teaching in their mother tongue needed more than seven years to catch up. Those who were introduced to English at an early age had more difficulties than those who were introduced to English when they were older. An explanation to this, according to Thomas and Collier, is that the students who were taught English at an early age showed success in learning the English language, but when they did not receive support in their mother tongue, the students began to fall back.

According to this study, three factors can influence students' language learning and language development. The first shows that in order for students with a mother tongue other than English to achieve success, they must receive education in their mother tongue, preferably for six years, and this can be done in parallel with English as well. Newly arrived students are no exception and should therefore also receive teaching in their mother tongue. The second shows that the students should have the opportunity to use their previous experiences and their cultural background as support when learning an additional language. The third factor that is essential for the school and the teachers to consider is about creating a supportive learning environment for the students to develop in (Thomas & Collier, 1997). This means that the students need to be in an environment where they can learn and one that motivates and encourages them.

Cummins (2017) has compiled a variety of research on multilingual students. Among these is research done in Canada, examining the results of seven different tests on the English language. The results were analyzed based on the students' age and how long they have lived in the country to see if these factors affected their language proficiency level. The result shows that it takes at least five years for students with an immigrant background to catch up. Furthermore, the students must also receive support continuously for several years in order to catch up and the teachers should not overestimate the students' second language skills because of their fluency in speech (Cummins, 2017, pp. 67-68). Further,

Cummins (2017) claims that there is a positive correlation between development and knowledge in the first and second language respectively (p.138).

One of Cummins' (2017) teaching strategies involves support that makes teaching more understandable through, for example, the use of students' first language, to convey concepts but also to support the students' active use of languages (Cummins, 2017, p.113). Since teachers are unable to learn the mother tongue of all students, it is often best to have a student supervisor in the classroom who speaks their language. The study supervisor helps students who have difficulties in the language. A study supervisors' tasks consist of explaining assignments and words, but also course plans. In this way, students get the help they need to complete worksheets and activities provided by the classroom teacher (Weeks, Phelan, MacFarlane, Pinson & Francis, 2011, pp.316-317).

Dogan (2013) identifies some of the problems that immigrants experience when they learn English as an L3. His study is based on teachers' views, and the result shows that the students face many challenges, including cognitive ones. It appears that the students suffer, among other things, from a lack of language skills that leads to students having difficulties in language learning. Furthermore, the results show that the older among the newly arrived immigrants encounter more problems in learning English than young people do, since they often find it harder to learn the language and lack motivation. When it comes to the teaching methods that teachers use to teach students, the result showed that these methods were designed with Swedish students in mind and they turned out to be non-stimulating for the students (Dogan, 2013, p.10).

Nweze (2014) investigates and emphasizes immigrants' views of language learning in Sweden based on observations. The results show that the most critical challenge for immigrants are the similarities that exist between English and Swedish. There are also other challenges, however, such as spelling, pronunciation and grammar. Furthermore, Nweze (2014) points out that the similarity problem was found to be most significant among those who had been taught English before Swedish. Another problem that was discovered during the observations was that even though the students are supposed to be in focus in language learning, the teachers were usually in the center, in the sense that the lessons consisted mostly of teachers presenting, explaining, and guiding, which means that the students often became passive listeners (Nweze, 2014).

In summary, previous research in the area shows that there are several factors, such as age, time, environment, mother tongue, and social factors that can affect language learning. Furthermore, previous research also emphasizes the importance of the mother tongue and its influence on L2 and L3 as well as the importance of different learning strategies to succeed in language learning.

## ***2.2 Learning strategies***

Ehrman and Oxford (1990) carried out an interview study with twenty adults. The study is based on different learning styles, through which the participants gather different language learning strategies. According to Ehrman and Oxford, strategies are conscious steps used by language learners to improve language acquisition and to store and reuse new information (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, p. 312). Furthermore, those who learn languages, at any level, use different learning strategies, but some are relatively unaware of their use of these strategies. The study also shows that proficient students seem to use a more extensive range of strategies in several situations than less proficient students. Students who are successful in their language learning use different strategies to become more self-directed and improve their performance. Learning styles, learning strategies, and language learning are related to each other, according to Ehrman & Oxford (1990, p. 312).

Ehrman and Oxford (1990) base their study on a language learning strategy system that includes direct and indirect strategies. Within the framework of the direct strategies we find the strategies that directly involve the language, for example, memory strategies used to memorize information in order to reuse it and cognitive strategies which involve using the language in order to build a sentence, for example. The indirect strategies are metacognitive ones that are designed to organize and evaluate learning and support language learning, even if they do not directly involve the use of languages. Direct and indirect strategies are equally important to use in language learning (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990, pp. 312-313).

The results of Ehrman and Oxford's study (1990) also show that there were no differences between male and female uses of strategies; both sexes used strategies to the same extent. The only difference that occurred was related to the age of the participants. This result corroborates many language teachers' view that age affects language learning and that the older one is, the more difficult it is to learn a language (p. 317). Furthermore, since students learn languages in different ways, the majority mentioned that they learn the language using social strategies that include listening and speaking, while a smaller number of participants mentioned that they learn on their own, i.e., by reading and writing (p. 317).

### ***2.3 The Critical Period Hypothesis***

The ability to acquire a new language is often claimed to be limited to a critical period. According to Flege, Yeni-Komshian and Liu (1999), the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) rests on the assumption that age-related effects seen in L2 studies are the result of maturational changes in brain structures that are used to learn and/or to process language (p. 79). However, there are different opinions about what is meant by a critical period, and when it ceases. Flege, Yeni-Komshian and Liu (1999) bring up, in their study, researchers who have concluded that a critical period exists only for phonology, while others have concluded that a critical period ends sooner for phonology than for morphology or syntax (p. 81).

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) as proposed by Lenneberg (1967) holds that primary language acquisition must occur during a critical period which ends at about the age of puberty with the establishment of cerebral lateralization of function. A strong implication of this hypothesis is that the processes involved in any language acquisition which takes place after the age of puberty will be qualitatively different from those involved in first language acquisition. A commonly drawn, though not absolutely necessary, corollary of the CPH is that any language learning which occurs after the age of puberty will be slower and less successful than normal first language learning (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978, p.1114)

The CPH theory is useful for this study since the newly arrived immigrants' age can influence their language learning. If language acquisition, according to Lenneberg's CPH

theory decreases or deteriorates after puberty, difficulties encountered by the students could possibly be explained by this.

## ***2.4 Language Introduction programs***

According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2019), the introductory programs (Introduktionsprogram) give students aged 16-19 who do not have grades in the core subjects an opportunity to enter a national program (a program that in turn gives them an opportunity to pursue further studies or gain employment) at upper secondary school. The students in the introductory program are at different levels with different needs and difficulties and therefore it is important for the teachers to adapt their teaching to suit the needs of all students. Each student follows an individual study plan to achieve their own goals (Skolverket, 2019). There are different introductory programs, and language introduction is one of these. Language introduction is for young students, 16-19 years, who are newly arrived immigrants in Sweden. Within this program, the focus is on acquiring skills in the Swedish language, thus enabling the students to enter a national program at upper secondary school.

Previously, the students were introduced to both Swedish and English at once to move forward quickly. This put pressure on the students, as they were supposed to learn two languages simultaneously. According to Skolverket, students enrolled in the program for language introduction at upper secondary school are supposed to have the opportunity to decide whether they want to learn one language at a time or two at the same time (Skolverket, 2019). The school where this study was carried out does not allow the students to learn one language at a time, however, which means that the students learn Swedish and English simultaneously.

## **3. Aim and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is twofold: to highlight some of the difficulties that newly arrived students encounter when they learn English simultaneously with learning the Swedish language and to find out which strategies can be used by teachers to support newly arrived

students' language development in the English language. To achieve this, I will examine the following questions:

- What difficulties do newly arrived students encounter, according to teachers and students, and how are these difficulties apparent in the English classroom?
- What strategies and working methods do teachers use to support newly arrived students' language development in English?
- How do the students and teachers work with aids and resources to address difficulties in English learning?
- What are some of the specific challenges or benefits of learning two languages simultaneously?

#### **4. Method of Study**

In order to gain knowledge about the everyday challenges that newly arrived immigrants face at school in connection with the English subject and the teachers' experiences of and views of newly arrived students' language learning, interviews with newly arrived students and teachers were required. Additionally, observations in the classroom were carried out. Understanding of the situation of the newly arrived students in Sweden was achieved by interviewing teachers and students, and by carrying out observations. The interviews with students and teachers were recorded.

The study uses a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews carried out in Swedish. Classroom observations and interviews (four newly arrived students and two teachers at an upper secondary school) represent the primary data. The study was intended to be carried out on the introductory language program at an upper secondary school. The students who were in focus in interviews and observations were only the newly arrived immigrants who were learning English. The focus of the classroom observations was difficulties that the students encounter in primarily comprehension and pronunciation of English.

The results of this research paper are based on the participants' answers and interpretations of the responses to the questions in the interviews. Therefore, it should be taken into account that teachers and students interpret the questions differently. Due to time

constraints, only four students and two teachers were interviewed at the same school. A broader perspective on this research area would probably have been achieved if more interviews, at different schools, had been carried out.

Under the following subheadings, detailed information about the method, interview structure, observations, participants, and consent, will be provided.

#### ***4.1 Method for analyzing data***

Discourse analysis will be used to analyze the collected data from the interviews. With the help of the participants' responses, the research questions have been addressed. The primary task involved in the analysis is the interpretation of the interview answers. As part of the discourse analysis, the answers from the participants in the interviews are seen as social texts where interviewers can make their own interpretations of the answers (Talja, 1999, p. 461). The role of language is also emphasized, since the language can determine the outcome of the interviews. Since the students were given the opportunity to use more than one language to answer the interview questions, the languages they used had a great importance in this context. It is essential to keep in mind that collected data are interpretations of the participants' answers to the interview questions, which means that there is no right or wrong, and that the responses represent their interpretation and perspective.

#### ***4.2 Semi-structured interviews***

The semi-structured interview is a common type of interview used in qualitative research. This type of interview involves the use of predetermined questions. What is good about semi-structured interviews is that the interview can be flexible, asking open questions that open up the possibility for more questions. As an interviewer, one can change the order and formulation of the questions depending on the answers given by the person being interviewed. The only drawback for an interviewer who is not used to this type of interview may be that they can have difficulties in quickly asking new questions based on previous answers (Doody & Noman, 2013, p. 29).

Six interviews were carried out, two with the participating teachers and four with the students. The interview guide for the semi-structured interviews consisted of 7 questions

(with follow-up questions), both for the students and the teacher interviews (Appendix 2 and 3). These questions were used to gather information about the respective backgrounds of the students and teachers as well as the students' problems with learning English as an L3 from the perspectives of the teachers and students. In addition, information about factors that affect the learning of an L3 and suggestions from both students and teachers about how to improve and facilitate the students' language development was gained. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the participants to express their views.

The questions were written in English, but the interview was conducted in Swedish, in order to make it easier for the students to discuss the questions and to allow them to clarify. They were allowed to use both Swedish and English to answer the questions. As some of the students have Arabic as their mother tongue, and the interviewer knows Arabic, they had the opportunity to explain what they found difficult to explain in Swedish and English in Arabic. The duration of the interview was 20-30 minutes, and it was recorded.

### ***4.3 Participants***

The participants in the interviews were two teachers and four students in the language introductory program in one upper secondary school. Access to these participants was gained through contact with a teacher on earlier placement training. The teachers involved teach groups of students at different levels, which means that they have different experiences that can benefit the study. The participating teachers have several years of work experience, and they have also taught students who are not newly arrived immigrants. In the result section, the two teachers who have been interviewed will be called T1 and T2, and the students will be called S1-4.

Only students who were classified as newly arrived immigrants and learning English were of interest in this study. The selection of students was made based on the levels they were at in their language development. Two of the students were categorised as beginners of English, while the other two have come far enough to be able to enter a national program. The four students aged 16 and 17 were selected from the language introduction program by the two participating teachers. The selection of groups for observations and interviews has not been made based on the students' respective origins and ethnicities but only on their language level and development. Although there are more than four students in the classes, there was no opportunity to interview more than four due to time constraints.

Two participating teachers were interviewed. The teachers have several years of experience, one more than 23 years and the other one approximately four years. Despite the significant difference in amount of experience, the two teachers identify the same difficulties. T1 has worked at primary school, secondary school, upper secondary school, and in adult education, while T2 has only worked in language introduction programs at upper secondary level. Both teachers have experience in teaching newly arrived immigrants.

#### ***4.4 Classroom observation***

Classroom observations should be made in ordinary classrooms where core subjects are taught, and special classes such as special groups of students who have difficulties should be avoided, as this may mean that there is a small number of selected students (Ross, Smith, Alberg & Lowther, 2004, p.150). Since the purpose of this study was to see how newly arrived students learn English as an L3, the observations took place during English lessons with newly arrived students. The students' English learning and teachers' English teaching were observed during two lessons.

Both lessons started, as usual, with the teachers welcoming the students. I got the opportunity to introduce myself to the students and tell them briefly about the purpose of the observation. The students were also informed that the observation was made without recording or note-taking. As an observer, my task was only to see how the lesson was carried out and what difficulties were emphasized during the lesson. Since the observations were not recorded and no notes were taken, no consent was needed from the students. However, the teachers had signed a consent form before the observations, as their way of working was observed.

After the classroom observations had taken place, some reflections were written down to keep in mind during the interviews with teachers and students.

#### ***4.5 Informed consent and ethical considerations***

When research involves people, they should be informed about the purpose of the study in relation to their participation and be free to choose whether or not to participate (Codex, 2018). The study can only be carried out if the participants have consented to it. Since consent only applies if the person has received information about the study, the participants

were provided with information to this end. The consent was well formulated and specified for the study. It is a requirement according to the Swedish law that the person involved in research should be informed about the overall plan for the study, the purpose of the study and the methods that will be used (Codex, 2018).

The content of the interviews is not sensitive, since it contains no personal data that can be traced to the participants. However, since the participants' responses were recorded, it is compulsory to have their consent. The consent form was written in Swedish, although the study is about English learning. Since the participating students do not fully understand English, it was essential to provide them with information about the study in a language they are familiar with. The participants, both teachers and students, have been provided with information about the study, the structure of the interview, and what information would be collected. They have each received a consent form to sign to give their approval. Consent may be withdrawn at any time with immediate effect without any reason, and the consent must also be documented. The participants were informed about this.

## **5. Results and analysis**

The data obtained from the interviews will be examined in this section. Additionally, the collected material will be analyzed to find similarities and differences in how the students experience their English learning. Furthermore, under the following subheadings, the research questions will be addressed. Reference is made to the recordings of the interviews. However, the answer to the first question is distributed in two sections, one for the teachers and one for the students.

### **5.1 *What difficulties do newly arrived students encounter, according to teachers and students, and how are these difficulties apparent in the English classroom?***

#### **5.1.1 *The teachers' opinions***

The difficulties encountered by many students when learning English mainly occur in connection with listening and reading (T1, 7:40). According to T1, these difficulties are discovered when the students are tested with regard to listening and reading. Some students have studied English before, and they are good at speaking and writing. However, some have never experienced listening tests, and they find it difficult to receive information from someone they cannot see (8:02). According to T1, this is partly due to the newly arrived immigrants' culture and also how their L1 education systems are structured. T1 believes that if they were to hear the teacher reading the same text in front of them, they would understand better. Since they do not see or know the person in the listening tests, it is harder to succeed (8:20). This shows that the students do not lack the skills, but that the strategies for how to handle these listening tests are missing. Furthermore, T1 claims that some students who are in the higher level group reach grade C<sup>1</sup> in reading, writing, and speaking, whereas, when it comes to listening, they do not manage as well.

T2 points out that another difficulty that the students encounter occurs when they write an assignment that is difficult for them to write. It is challenging for them to do something on their own, and the teacher must continuously lead them. This may be due to their backgrounds and most students have a school background where their learning has been teacher-led all the time, and individual assignments hardly occur (9:23). When they are asked to hand in a written assignment where they have to choose the subject, it becomes difficult for them because they cannot manage so much responsibility and need confirmation from the teacher on whether they are doing things right or not (9:50). Another difficulty that these two teachers experience is that some students believe that the only thing needed to learn a language is grammar (9:56). This leads them to believe that the only thing that the teacher needs to do is to stand and teach grammar during the lessons and nothing more. It is challenging to make the students understand that a language can be learned in several different ways and that it is not just about grammar.

According to the two participating teachers, age is also a problem for the newly arrived students because their age limits them in their learning of English. Some of the newly arrived immigrants are a little older, and it is clear that the older one gets, the harder it is

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<sup>1</sup> In the Swedish grading system, letters are used to indicate where in the grading scale the student is. The letters used are F, E, C and A where A is the highest grade and F means fail and the E is a pass whereas C is a grade between E and A.

to learn a language (10: 20). It is also easier to learn several languages at the same time when you are younger and these students are at an age that makes it harder for them to master two languages simultaneously. However, it is easier for them to learn Swedish and the difference is that they live in Sweden and encounter the Swedish language daily, while English learning only takes place during the lessons at school; after that, they do not encounter more English (10:38).

Time is also a difficulty for the students, according to the teachers and by time, the teachers mean the time that the students have lived in Sweden. The students often think about the time they have been here rather than how much they have developed in the language. For some students, a year is enough time spent in Sweden to manage both Swedish and English, while some who have lived in Sweden for over three years are at a grade 6 level<sup>2</sup> (11:52).

When it comes to difficulties that depend on the students themselves, the teachers mention that students who do not have a school background and cannot translate into their mother tongue face additional difficulties. Illiterates, for example, whose first school language becomes Swedish, have difficulties in translating what they do not understand into their mother tongue. Many of these students can speak and understand their mother tongue, but they cannot read and write and have no school language (15:40). The fact that English is their third language is itself a difficulty, and having two additional languages that they are not well-grounded in and can relate to makes things even more difficult. T2 points out that the stronger the mother tongue of the students, the stronger the second and third languages become (16:01). The students' language background must be stable and functional in order for the students to be able to build on additional knowledge and language.

### **5.1.2 The students' opinions**

The participating students in the language introductory program all received the same questions and were asked to describe the difficulties they encounter in learning English. A significant difference between the students and the participating teachers was that the

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<sup>2</sup> The levels in the Swedish school system refers to the yearly levels that the students are at. When it is stated level 6, this means that the student is at year 6 level of knowledge

students were not aware in the same way of the difficulties described by the teachers. For the students, the difficulties were mostly due to time constraints, and the students thought that they did not have enough time to learn both Swedish and English in order to enter a national program. Furthermore, the students felt that they were not appropriately challenged, even though the pressure to manage with two languages at the same time is high.

According to S1, the greatest difficulty about learning English is to be able to maintain focus. Since the students learn Swedish and English at the same time, they need to be equally focused on both languages (S1, 5:40). Furthermore, all four participating students believe that it is difficult to go from one language to another in a short time and that one can lose focus completely in the process of trying. When the students are learning Swedish, they are entirely focused on Swedish, and when they are learning English, the focus needs to be quickly switched to English. Moreover, students may mix the languages when they do not have time to learn one language at a time, according to the participating students.

S2, on the other hand, points out that the most considerable difficulty they encounter in learning English is grammar. This student is multilingual and can speak two other languages in addition to Swedish and English. The reason this student finds English grammar difficult is that it differs significantly from the structures of languages she has learned before. The student also has difficulties with listening and speaking. S2 explains that the reason is that there is not enough time to think about the words (4:30). When reading or writing a text, there is time to reflect on the words. This is not possible when listening or talking. S3 agrees that it is easier to write because you have the words in your mind and can take the time to write, but when it comes to talking, there is no time to think (3:30). When it comes to listening, the difficulty is that it goes too fast. The student has a hard time keeping up with what is said. Once again, it is pointed out that one does not have time to reflect on the words (S3, 4:45).

S4, just like the previous students, has difficulties keeping Swedish and English apart, because they have to learn two new languages at the same time. Problems encountered when learning English is that one mixes the languages (2:15). Concerning the four language skills, this student is good at listening and reading comprehension. However,

writing is a difficulty for S4. The reason why it is more challenging to write lies in the difficulty of producing something that others can understand (S4, 4:20). When it comes to speaking English, it is also complicated, and the difficulty is due to not having anyone to speak English with, so this student is better at reading and writing (S4, 6:20). Factors that can affect newly arrived students' language learning may be that it is a new language and that those who have not studied English before must start from zero (8:30).

## **5.2 *What strategies and working methods do teachers use to support the newly arrived students' language development in the English language?***

Strategies and working methods differ slightly between the two teachers, and it is essential to point out that during the two lessons that were observed, only a small part of their teaching model emerged. The rest of the description is based on how the teachers themselves describe their methods. Both T1 and T2 try to speak only English during lessons and use Swedish only when they need to explain further to those students who have not understood. Since the two teachers teach groups that are at different levels, there are some differences. T1 has groups where the students are at higher levels, and most of them will pass grade 9 level, while T2 had groups representing lower levels, and these students are between grade 4 and 6 levels. When the students had difficulties to understand words and phrases, the teachers used different strategies to make sure they have understood. Both T1 and T2 used body language and gestures to clarify (17:48). This would help students understand words they have difficulties to understand otherwise, especially for illiterate students who cannot translate words and phrases to their mother tongue.

The teachers also use images to show different meanings, which can facilitate understanding for the students when the words are otherwise translated only to Swedish. Furthermore, the teachers describe that illiterate students, who cannot translate words and sentences into their languages, cannot use aids such as Google translate to facilitate their language learning and say that usually they ask their friends for help. There are some words that they cannot translate even if they can read and write, as they may not be within their frame of reference, for example, the phrase to "celebrate Midsummer" is not included in their vocabulary (T1, 17:14). Furthermore, T2 mentions that they often put up plays in the classroom and use google picture to facilitate the students' English learning. T2 also tries

to explain the words, for example, by using synonyms or giving explanations for what they mean. Both teachers emphasized that having a study supervisor in the classroom can facilitate students' language learning as the students can have the words explained in their mother tongue. However, this is only helpful in cases where the supervisor speaks the students' mother tongue.

What would also facilitate and improve the newly arrived students' language development, according to T1, is if there was a preparation group where the students were able to start and land, so that they end up at the right level in the groupings (T1, 30:52). At the school where the study was carried out, there is a problem now, due to cuts in the economy, which means that the teachers have to teach bigger groups. These changes result in a disadvantage for some students who need more individualized teaching in the classroom. The size of the group makes it difficult for the teacher to identify the students who need extra help, and even if they were to be seen, time is not enough (T1, 32:28). What is also emphasized is the possibility of being able to give the students individual study plans. Furthermore, more specific orientations, study preparation, and vocational preparation would be needed and would improve and facilitate the situation for the students in terms of giving them opportunities to set their own goals and work towards the goals.

### ***5.3 How do the students work with aids and resources to address difficulties in English learning?***

Every student at the school has access to a computer, and there are also ipads at the school. The use of computers or ipads makes it easier for students to translate words or phrases they do not understand in English into their mother tongue. The teachers point out that many programs and apps can be purchased to facilitate language learning for students (33:20). However, the participating students talk a lot about the aids they use when they encounter difficulties while learning English. Glossaries is something they never use, while google translate is popular among all four students. S1 uses YouTube to learn English, and also to see explanations in the English language, in particular grammar (5:35). The four students also suggest that movies, music, and books help language learning.

Although the students have access to computers, they use many of their classmates and especially classmates who can speak their mother tongue. One explanation, according to T1, might be that what the student does not understand may not be within their reference framework, and then it does not help to find a translation on google. Having words and phrases explained in their mother tongue is the easiest way for them to understand (T1, 17:14). The teachers believe that it is good that the students find aids to facilitate their English learning and use them when they have difficulties. On the other hand, teachers state that sometimes there is also a problem with the students' use of tools. Some students do not produce texts because of an over-reliance on for example, Google translate, meaning that the teacher cannot see what the students have produced and what Google translate has produced for them. Furthermore, T1 says that this happens because the students want to submit what they think the teacher expects of them and do not understand that it is about what they can produce themselves (10:56).

#### **5.4            *What are some of the specific challenges or benefits of learning two languages simultaneously?***

Both teachers and students pointed out several times during the interviews that the most significant difficulty in the students' English learning is that they learn two new languages simultaneously. Based on what the students and teachers describe, it is easier to learn the Swedish language because they hear Swedish every day. According to T2, some students can keep Swedish and English apart in the beginning, but once they get into the languages, they become confused. The reason why it is so confusing for the students is that they have one leg in the Swedish classroom and the other one in the English classroom. The two interviewed teachers suggested a postponement of one year before these students start to learn English. The students would then have the opportunity to opt out of English the first year so that they have a better ground in Swedish before they start learning English (14:57). There are schools today that offer this opportunity, but all schools are not fond of that idea.

According to the interviewed students, there are no advantages associated with learning two languages simultaneously. Furthermore, the students believe that not only are they new in the country, and everything is a challenge, they are also supposed to learn two languages simultaneously (2:17). Likewise, S2 says that the option of postponing the learning of

English should exist for the students, so that they can focus on one language at a time (7:23).

## **6. Conclusion and discussion**

In this last section, the results of the study are presented following the order of the research questions. Questions about interpretation and recommendations for further research will also be presented.

The results in this study show that the most significant difficulties that newly arrived students encounter in their English learning primarily occur in connection with listening comprehension. This is, according to the teachers, mainly visible through the tests on listening comprehension that have been carried out. The difficulties are due to various factors, including that the students do not have access to the appropriate learning strategies some of the students have little or no school background at all, and also find it difficult to focus on two languages simultaneously.

The interviewed teachers use English in the classroom when they give instructions and explanations. However, sometimes the teacher uses Swedish, but it is only when the students need further explanations. There are also times when Swedish does not help either, and then the teacher uses pictures or set up plays to make it easier for the students.

Moreover, the results show that all the students have access to computers that they can use. This is a useful tool for these students, as they can work on their own as well and look up words they do not understand. Most students use Google translate, music, YouTube, and movies to facilitate and develop their language learning. However, the disadvantage of, for example, Google translate, in some cases, is that the students do not produce their own texts. From the interviews with the students, it also emerged that classmates were very helpful for the students. Finally, based on the teachers' and student' answers, the results show that there are no advantages in learning Swedish and English simultaneously as it only confuses the students.

The collected data, together with background information, and previous research, show that what influences the students' language learning is their age, mother tongue, length of stay in the country, and the learning environment. Previous research strengthens the results of this study. According to previous research, for example, age is an essential factor promoting language learning. Lennebergs' Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) together with the age of the newly arrived immigrants may explain some of the difficulties that the students encounter (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978, p. 1114). Language acquisition somehow deteriorates after puberty and the newly arrived immigrants at upper secondary level can be accommodated within the framework of CPH (Flege, Yeni-Komshian and Liu, 1999).

Considering the factors listed by Jessner (2008), according to which motivation and individual life experience can affect students' language learning, the answers from the participants indicate that these factors indeed have a decisive influence on the newly arrived students' language learning. Previous events in the newly arrived immigrants' lives and the challenges they face when they come to Sweden can obstruct their development. Moreover, according to Ehrman & Oxford (1990), learning strategies have an essential role in language learning and affect the students' language learning, and based on the interviewed teachers' answers, it can be strengthened that some of the difficulties encountered by the students are due to a lack of strategies to cope with some tasks. Also, based on previous research (Thomas & Collier, 1997), and the interviewed teachers, the importance of the students' mother tongue is emphasized and the more grounded the students are in their mother tongue, the easier their language learning process in L2 and L3 becomes.

For future research, it may be interesting to investigate how students (without immigrant backgrounds) and language teachers on the national programs at upper secondary school would answer similar questions on what difficulties the students encounter and causes. In this way, one might be able to detect similarities and differences in terms of difficulties that students encounter in language learning.

It is hoped that this study has given some insights into various difficulties that newly arrived students encounter in English language learning at a Swedish upper secondary school and the factors that can affect and influence these students' English learning. This

will hopefully help current and future teachers to be more effective in their teaching practices.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix 1 Interview with teacher**

#### **Background**

1. Describe your work experience in teaching English?
  - What language/accent do you use when teaching?
2. How would you describe your English teaching skills?

#### **Problems**

3. What difficulties do you find that your students have in learning English?
4. As a teacher and based on your perspective, what are the problems that newly arrived students face when learning English as L3?
  - Why do you think they have these problems?
  - How do you describe the students' different skills (e.g., speaking, writing, listening and reading)?
  - Do you find that the students have difficulties with the different skills, if so which are the difficulties?

#### **Factors**

5. What factors affect the learning of English as L3 for the newly arrived students?
  - What are the factors related to the teacher that affect the learning English as L3?
  - What are the factors related to the student that affect the learning of English as L3?

#### **Suggestions**

6. As a teacher, what suggestions do you have for improving and facilitating the newly arrived students' language development?
7. What tools and learning strategies do you propose to facilitate the students' language development?

## **Appendix 2 Interview with the student**

### **Background**

1. What is your mother tongue?
2. What languages do you speak?
  - Which of these languages do you feel strongest in, respectively, the weakest
  - Which language brings you closer to the English one?
3. When did you start learning English as a third language (L3)?
  - What is your purpose of learning English?

### **Problems**

4. Based on your perspective, what are the problems that you face when learning English as L3?
  - Why do you think you have these problems?
  - How do you describe your skills?
  - Speaking, writing, listening and reading?
  - If you have difficulties with the different skills, what are the reasons behind these problems?
5. In view of your own experiences, what challenges and benefits do you see in learning two languages simultaneously?

### **Factors**

6. What are the factors that affect the learning of English as L3 for you as a newly arrived student?
  - What are the factors related to the teacher that affect your learning of English? Please explicate
  - What are the factors related to the yourself that affect your learning of English?  
Please explicate

### **Suggestions**

7. What suggestions do you have for facilitating and improving newly arrived students English learning?

- What are your suggestions for improving English as L3?
- Are there any strategies or tools that you think can help students in language learning?
- Have you tested these yourself?

### **Appendix 3 Consent form**

#### **Samtycke till deltagande i undersökning**

Mitt namn är Shadan Ali och jag läser ämneslärarprogrammet på Högskolan för lärande och kommunikation i Jönköping. I utbildningen ingår att genomföra en studie, som kommer att presenteras i en skriftlig rapport vid högskolan. Jag skriver nu mitt examensarbete i engelska och kommer att utföra en undersökning i skolan.

Studiens syfte är att belysa de svårigheter nyanlända elever och lärare möter i engelska undervisningen i den svenska skolan.

Deltagandet i studien innebär att en intervju kommer att genomföras på plats samt klassrumsobservation. Intervjun beräknas ta omkring 20-30 minuter. Hela intervjun kommer att spelas in på band. Intervjuerna kommer att behandlas anonymt vilket betyder att intervjuerna kommer att avidentifieras och behandlas i enlighet med bestämmelser i Sekretesslagen.

Klassrumsobservationen kommer att bestå av att jag kommer vara med under en hel lektion. Jag kommer att vara osynlig och observationen görs genom att jag ser och lyssnar till det som sker i klassrummet. Inget kommer att spelas in och jag kommer enbart ta lite anteckningar för egen reflektion.

Din medverkan är frivillig och kan när som helst avbrytas.

Jag har informerats om studiens syfte, om hur informationen samlas in, bearbetas och handlas. Jag har även informerats om att mitt deltagande är frivilligt och att jag, när jag vill, kan avbryta min medverkan i studien utan att ange orsak. Jag samtycker härmed till att medverka i denna studie.

*Datum:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Underskrift:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Namnförtydligande:* \_\_\_\_\_