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Teaching Writing in Upper Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this essay is to investigate how writing is taught in upper secondary school as well as what kind of writing is taught, the teachers' attitudes towards writing and how written production is assessed. I am interested to see if teachers use different methods both when it comes to teaching and grading writing.

My research is based on recorded interviews with four upper secondary school teachers from two different schools. The teachers were interviewed on their planning, executing and grading of writing within English A and B. I have also carried out extensive reading of earlier research in order to get a complete background.

The result shows that all four teachers believe that writing is an important part of language learning and they all enjoy teaching it. The main focus is put on the formal aspects of writing, in order to prepare students for the national tests. Only one of the four teachers feel that creative writing is the best way to learn a second language. All teachers go through the formal rules of writing with the entire class before giving them an assignment. The biggest difference between the different teachers is the marking and final grading of the written production, where one teacher does not grade assignments at all and another has developed her own scale.

Search words: teaching writing, interviews, attitudes, teaching methodology

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1 Introduction

Someone once told me that asking students to write in another language, whether it is an essay, an article or creative fiction, is the hardest thing a teacher can ask for. It requires an understanding of, and knowledge about not only the subject at hand, but also the language in which the text is to be written. Students need to know about syntax, grammar and vocabulary, at least subconsciously. They need to know about form and rules for the particular piece of writing the teacher is expecting. In short, there is more to writing than simply producing words on a piece of paper. How does one as a teacher go about the task of teaching writing?

In this essay I will investigate how writing is taught in upper secondary school. Through interviews with upper secondary school teachers I will investigate how one may undertake teaching writing in a second language as well as what kind of writing is taught.

Writing is included in all of the English syllabi. In English A students should: “in writing be able to inform, argue and express emotions and values, as well as develop the ability to process and enhance their own written production” (Skolverket.se).

How does one as a teacher go about teaching writing? What kind of writing is and should be taught at school? What attitudes towards writing exist among the teachers? Extensive research has been carried out in order to be able to answer these questions. I will present the findings of this research in this essay.

2 Aim

The aim with my essay is to find out how and what kind of writing is taught in upper secondary school. The following questions will be addressed:

- How is writing taught in upper secondary school?
- With focus on the syllabi, what kind of writing is taught?
- What are the attitudes of the teachers towards writing?
- How is the written production assessed?

3 Method

3.1 Literature

In earlier research writing is often discussed, both when it comes to teaching in itself and what effects different kinds of writing may have on language development. Books, articles and other publications, including the control documents, have been used in connection with my research findings.

3.2 Interviews

As this is a qualitative research paper I have interviewed teachers about their way of teaching writing, and in doing so I have also discovered their attitudes and feelings about the subject matter. Four teachers were interviewed, all female, and they primarily teach in upper secondary school. The focus on upper secondary school is mainly due to my own interest in working there.

The teachers work in two different schools. I tried to contact teachers from more than these two schools, but many were busy and thus not able to take part in my investigation. I also contacted male teachers, as I thought it would be interesting to see if the teaching method and the attitude towards teaching writing differed between women and men. Unfortunately, none of the male teachers I contacted were able to participate.

The four teachers who agreed to take part were sent the questions a few days in advance in order to be able to prepare. Working like this enabled the teachers to write down a few notes on the subject, which ultimately led to a better interview. When presenting the result of these interviews I will refer to the teachers as A, B, C and D.

All interviews were recorded on tape and later transcribed. This way I was able to keep the other aspects of communication, since intonation and pauses are important when it comes to determining the different attitudes.

The interviews were constructed to serve as a starting point for further discussion. To view the questions see appendix 1.

3.2.1 Possible Interview Problems

There are some risks involved with interviewing that may end up damaging the intended research. The persons being interviewed might be influenced by the interviewer, and might therefore change their answer from the original one to better please the interviewer (Edenborough 10). Also, the answers may be deceptive. It is hard to check whether a statement is true or false, although it is best to assume that the answers received are truthful.

4 Background

In this background I will deal with earlier research in the field of writing, different approaches to teaching writing as well as the Swedish curricula of English in upper secondary school.

4.1 Teaching Writing

4.1.1 Why Teach Writing?

“An integral part of participating fully in a new cultural [language] is learning how to communicate when the other person is not right in front of us” (Raimes 3). According to Ann Raimes, author of Techniques in Teaching Writing, this is one of the most important reasons why writing should be taught in school. Writing letters, blogging, keeping journals and instant messaging have all become normal ways of communicating, and they all cultivate a writing habit that teachers should be aware of and support (NCTE).

The fact that people need to communicate is not the only reason why second language learners should have writing as a teacher led activity; there is an additional and important fact: “writing helps our students learn” (Raimes 3). As writing is a multifaceted skill it does not help only to listen to lectures on writing in general, grammar, syntax etc. The best way to learn is by doing. Starting, re-writing, discussing, giving feedback and re-writing again are all part of the process. The journey from idea to finished product is a long one, and sometimes students need more help once they have reached the middle rather than having someone tell them what is good or bad with the finished work (NCTE).

There is also the social factor to take into consideration; writing and being able to write many different things legibly is a highly valued skill in today's society. Especially for those who come from not so privileged backgrounds, being able to write (along with speaking, reading and controlling the language in general) may prove to be the way to change (DeLuca 2). In 2004 the American National Commission on Writing published a report on the importance of writing in the workplace. They found that writing acts as a "threshold skill", as it may be the deciding determinant of employment, promotion and salary raise. Also, people who do not know how to write and communicate in a manner appropriate to the context will not be hired, or if they are, will not be considered for promotion. The survey also found that applicants with poorly written letters are not likely to be called to an interview (The National Commission on Writing).

One must also remember that while speaking is in partly unconscious skill, learnt from when children are very young, writing is a cultural invention that requires guidance and conscious effort in order to be mastered (Flood 968).

4.1.2 How?

4.1.2.1 Approaches to Teaching Writing

Teaching someone to write for the first time or help someone develop their writing further may not seem too hard at first glance. But, as writing is a skill that is in itself dependent on other skills, this may prove to be quite a challenge (Flood 967). In fact writers have to deal with a number of different factors when producing a written product, see fig 1.

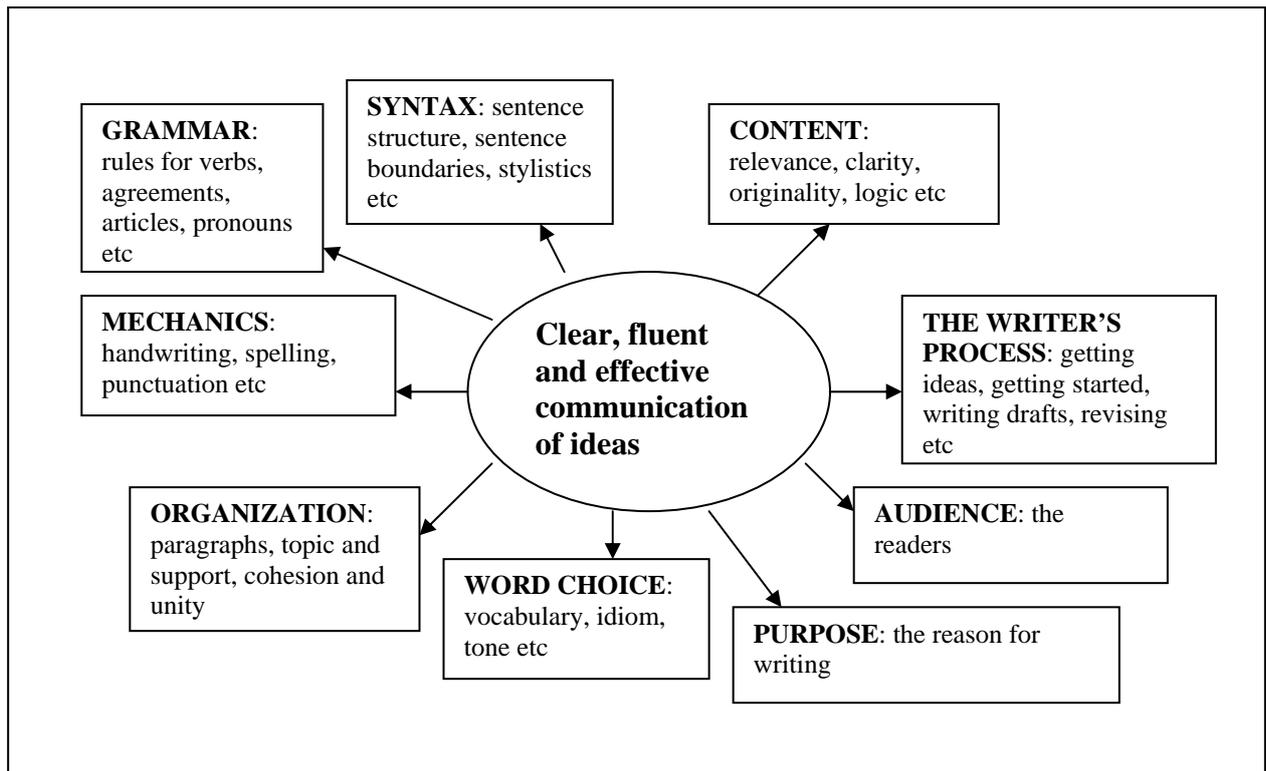


Fig. 1 Producing a piece of writing (Raimes 6)

The approaches are described in general and overlap as teachers tend to use more than one method to teach writing, depending on what knowledge is to be learnt.

4.1.2.2 The Controlled-to-Free Approach

When using this approach teachers give students prewritten sentences in which the students practice certain skills, like changing past to present or from plural to singular. The work is carried out during a certain amount of time, for example a lesson, and with given material. As the errors a student might make are easy to discover, marking and assessing these assignments does not take long for the teacher. With this approach syntax, grammar and mechanics are stressed. Only when the student reaches intermediate level may freer writing be used (Raimes 6).

As this approach stresses the language rather than content one can draw a parallel to the 1950's and 60's when writing was seen more as a product that was to be assessed rather than a process which changes many times between the idea and the final text (Hyland 12).

4.1.2.3 The Free-Writing Approach

This approach focuses mainly on quantity rather than quality. Free writing on given topics is assigned where the teacher then corrects as little as possible. Content and fluency should come first, rather than grammar and form. The general idea is that once a writer has the idea firmly on paper, grammar, form and syntax will come later. Using this approach is mostly beneficial at intermediate and upper level (Raimes 7).

Before students are able to write freely focus is put on four stages: familiarizations, controlled writing, guided writing and finally free writing. This way of working is closely related to the paragraph-pattern approach and the controlled-to-free approach (Badger & White 153).

4.1.2.4 The Paragraph-Pattern Approach

According to this approach organization is the key to learning writing and producing a good written product. Students are given paragraphs to analyze, rearrange and copy. They may delete or insert sentences as they choose. The paragraph-pattern approach is based on the principle that every language organizes their communication in different ways. Thus students must analyze paragraphs in the target language and practice things that are typical in that language, in order to be able to write fluently (Raimes 7).

4.1.2.5 The Grammar-Syntax-Organization Approach

The grammar-syntax-organization approach is based on the need to work with several aspects of writing simultaneously. Tasks are based on several different aspects at once and students are guided and expected to see the connections between what they are trying to write and what they actually need to write. Forms and message are key features in this approach (Raimes 8).

4.1.2.6 The Communicative Approach

This approach is based on the idea of an audience. Typical tasks within this area consist of writing a letter to a pen friend in another part of the world for instance. Students are asked to focus on two questions while preparing to write: 'why am I writing this' and 'who will read it'. As far as content goes this is a freer operation. Students may write about almost anything, but they may also be given tasks like describing a winter day. The teacher should not be considered the main audience in most cases, which traditional teaching otherwise states. (Raimes 8).

This approach may also be described as a functional approach, as students learn that writing can be the means to an end (Hyland 13).

4.1.2.7 The Process Approach

The emphasis in this approach lies on the process rather than the written product, where the key question here is: ‘how’. In this approach teachers try to make students recognize that what they write first is not necessarily what the text will look like or contain in the end. To do the process approach justice requires a large amount of time since work is divided into several parts. First students write their first draft, which is not marked or corrected by the teacher. Using peer response or other types of feedback the student will then have another opportunity to produce a second draft. The aim is to explore the chosen topic and develop it as the writing proceeds (Hyland 13).

The process approach is the most recent ideas and the approach suggested by many researchers. It may also be referred to as expressivism, “as it encourages writers to explore their beliefs, engage with the ideas of others, and connect with readers” (Hyland 14).

4.1.2.8 Group Writing

Forming a writing group is often an extension of the process approach, and is similar to the peer response. Hammarén describes how seven people get together once or twice a month to read and write together. This method is not about form or organization, but very much about content and allowing oneself to write whatever pleases (Hammarén 5). The problem with this method seen from the school’s perspective is that it is time consuming, and the real question is whether or not the teacher and lesson plan allow for this kind of method in upper secondary school.

4.2 The Control Documents

4.2.1 The Curriculum for Upper Secondary School

One of the many aspects stressed in the curriculum for upper secondary school is the growing internationalization, and that students should acquire knowledge that will aid them in a global society. One of the tasks of the upper secondary school is to “deepen and develop the knowledge of pupils as preparation for working life or studies at university and college” (Skolverket 9-12).

4.2.1.1 Goals to Strive For

Upper secondary school should strive for:

- Students being able to affect a changing vocational and civic life.

- Students having knowledge about internationalization. (Skolverket 15)

4.2.1.2 Goals to Attain

Before leaving upper secondary school, students should:

- Be able to express themselves appropriately in speech and writing according to context.
- Be able to use English in a functional way, both in vocational and civic life. (Skolverket 16)

It is also the teacher's responsibility to:

- Organize the work and tasks so that students experience knowledge as meaningful.
- Support students when it comes to language and their communicative development. (Skolverket 17)

4.2.2 English

It is stated that the school should strive for students to “refine their ability to express themselves in writing in different contexts, as well as develop their awareness of language and creativity” (Skolverket). Students should also analyze their language and work with it in order to gain clarity, variation and formal accuracy (Skolverket). Further specifics on how students should progress in the target language are given within each course.

4.2.3 English A Syllabus

4.2.3.1 Goals to Attain

After finishing the English A course students should:

- be able to formulate themselves in writing in order to inform, instruct, argue and express feelings and values, as well as have the ability to work through and improve their own written production.
- be able to independently retrieve information from different sources, as well as process and structure the information obtained. (Skolverket)

4.2.4 English B Syllabus

4.2.4.1 Goals to Attain

- be able to orally and in writing summarise and comment on different types of texts, especially those related to the area of interest or study orientation.
- have the ability to present contents in writing in a clear and well-structured way, as well as be able to express themselves in a varied and personal manner with respect to the audience and situation. (Skolverket)

4.3 Assessing Written Production

Assessing and giving feedback on written production may cause problems. How much should teachers correct when it comes to grammatical errors, vocabulary mistakes or syntax misuse? Is content more important than form or vice versa? When it comes to grading, there are criteria that must be fulfilled in order to acquire a certain mark. But while the students are still working with their texts, how does one help them along without disregarding language or content? James states that teachers should be aware of the nature of assessment, in other words: get to know the way in which grading works. Also, teachers should be aware of the difference between the purpose of assessment and the methods of assessment. The purpose of assessment can be formative, diagnostic, evaluative etc, while the methods of assessment may be different types of examination, quizzes, presentations etc (James 89-95).

Studies recently carried out show that very few teachers give students longer comments on their work. Rather, they mark technical errors, and leave no encouragement for further writing (DeLuca 266). According to Raimes it is the teacher's duty to respond both to grammatical errors as well as content and organization when assessing a student's work (DeLuca 266). The best approach to grammatical errors is to only indicate they are there rather than point them out. Moreover, research has shown that writing comments between lines or at the end of the essay has proven to have little or no effect on students. Most make a mental note of the teacher's comments, but spend more time looking at the grade than noticing the errors or corrections (DeLuca 280).

Ur argues the same point, that language should be corrected, but she also says that: "the problem is one of potential conflict [...] between language instruction and encouragement of learning" (Ur 171). There should be a balance, but when to lean either way will vary according to context (Ur 171).

Alan Evison claims that since almost all assessing are formal, students have little or no room for creative risk-taking, which results in 'safe' but uniform work. There is hardly any time for re-writing and giving more feedback, and the same is true for Swedish schools. The question then, Evison argues, is why give feedback at all? (Evison's lecture notes)

4.3.1 Peer Response

There are many things to be gained from peer response: the activities may take place in different stages of the writing process, students learn by both giving and receiving feedback, talking to a friend rather than talking to the teacher is easier in some cases. Peer response also helps develop students' ability to analyze and revise not only their own work, but also someone else's, and adds to students' self esteem (Ferris 224-226).

4.4 Motivation

In Motivation for Achievement: Possibilities for Teaching and Learning Alderman states that "[motivation] leads to possibilities for fostering the development of student's potential or 'life chances'" (Alderman 3). Research has shown that underachieving students often suffer from the lack of two things: effort and ability. While western society has a way of equating human value with accomplishment students are unconsciously led to believe that ability is the main reason for failing or succeeding. It is also the students themselves who judge their ability, by comparing to fellow classmates. In order to protect themselves against losing self-worth students set either too high or too low goals, and withhold effort to reach them. In this way students are able to protect themselves against the risk of losing self-worth for reasons other than ability (Alderman 3).

The same problem is true for effort. Many students are judged to be unmotivated or lazy, due to a twisted idea of success and failure. There is a sense of disengagement; students would rather be out with friends than doing something extra for a better grade (Alderman 3).

Unfortunately, many of the motivational problems can be traced back to the classroom learning climate. The optimum motivational climate exists in a classroom where motivation in itself is taken into consideration and cultivated by both the teacher and the school as a whole.

Examples of such a classroom:

- Assignments are meaningful with reasonable challenge
- Students have opportunities to take part in decision making

- Progress and good content are the foundation of the assessment system (Alderman 4)

Motivational problems also arise when students fail to see the connection between assignments and real life issues. Teachers often ask for knowledge specific to a certain area, like a particular piece of poetry, and students may have a hard time seeing what they can gain from such knowledge in adolescence (Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn 60). Research has also shown that families with lower income, a lack of healthcare and proper housing also have an effect on student motivation (Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn 60).

In order to enhance student motivation when it comes to the actual writing Haber argues that teachers must not forget that personal essays and the like still may include creativity. Students should be able to add small details that may not be considered true in the strictest sense, but still does not disrupt the background of the essay (Haber). By adding elements of human fantasy in non-creative writing Haber states “teachers can help students discover the worlds within themselves and the language needed to bring those worlds to others” (Haber).

5 Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Within this section I will present the findings of my research. The teachers are referred to as A, B, C and D. The analysis is divided into four parts, each addressing a formal question. At the end of each part comes a discussion. For interview questions see appendix 1.

5.2 How is Writing Taught in Upper Secondary School?

5.2.1 Introduction

There are both similarities as well as differences between all four teachers. I found that most of the time all teachers teach writing as a separate lesson, seldom incorporating it with something else. They all expect students to understand and draw conclusions from other language parts, like grammar and vocabulary, and incorporate that knowledge when writing.

5.2.2 Teacher A

According to teacher A, her students are never allowed to write anything creative in school. Though all kinds of writing are creative, she says, students are always given clear and precise instructions, like words, headlines and structure development, before the actual writing begins. The students are expected to write all essays and assignments at home, except for the national test. She explains that now and again she has a lesson where sample essays are handed out which they go through together. There are no lessons where the students write themselves, only lessons where the rules are gone through.

5.2.3 Teacher B

Unlike teacher A, teacher B often lets her students sit in class and write when it comes to formal writing. Much focus is put on essays, articles and journals as “students need to know about different types of writing”. With the help of different writing sources (books, web pages, articles etc) teacher B lectures her students on writing before giving them an assignment. One such lesson occurs every time the students are expected to write in a new style.

5.2.4 Teacher C

Both free and bound writing are part of teacher C’s method. The teaching situation may be separate, meaning that the entire lesson is solely based on writing, or it may be part of a lesson. When it comes to writing longer pieces in class students are given a paper with subjects that they are allowed to choose from. When writing in class students are not allowed to use any aid, like dictionaries. Sometimes teacher C writes a checklist for the students where she asks them to check grammar, syntax and other common errors. She comments: “They [the students] don’t write for the sake of writing, but to practice their language, of course”. Also, teacher C notes that she spends up to 50 % of the lesson time on writing.

Writing is also given as homework, and then mainly in English B. A typical task would be to write a summary of a longer text in their textbooks.

Writing groups are used by this teacher, though she admits that she hardly ever has time to work with the same piece of writing more than once.

5.2.5 Teacher D

With the help of the text book teacher D goes through the main rules of the particular piece of writing she is expecting from her students. She always gives subjects for the assignments, which means that all students always have the same topic. The rules are gone through in class before the assignment is handed out. When an essay is written in school the students are not allowed to use any aid. As writing takes a great deal of time, most of the lesson is used when writing is involved. The assignments are usually connected to something they have worked with in class, something from the textbook or a novel. Recently teacher D has also given subjects based on social events, in order to keep students motivated. In general the students spend an entire lesson writing once a month.

5.2.6 Discussion

Many of the approaches accounted for in the background are present in the teaching methods of these four teachers. Interestingly enough it seems that all four have slightly different ways of working and all four use different approaches in their teaching. Teacher A uses a mixture between paragraph-pattern approach and the grammar-syntax-organization approach. The sample essays given to her students show what a good paper looks like, but at the same time form and message are key elements in her teaching, as the students are given a separate judging on content.

The same mix is used by teacher D, especially when it comes to essay writing. The instructions for each type of writing are found in their textbooks. These pages work as a sort of how-to and guide the students to a step-by-step learning experience.

Teacher B has also laid her focus on the formal aspects of writing, and she also seems to be the only teacher who uses many of the different approaches. With articles and essays the paragraph-pattern approach seems to be the dominating one, but journal writing clearly falls within the communicative approach.

I was rather surprised to find that only one teacher of these four use free writing, as teacher C does. What was even more surprising, though, was that teacher C says she prefers this way to the others, due to the greater possibility to better judge students' language progress.

The biggest similarity between all the teachers is that they all have lessons where they go through the common rules of writing a certain piece. Material is given to the students and they are expected to study the material or at least keep it for future reference. These lessons occur before the assignment is given and written.

It should also be noted that all teachers have expressed a wish to work with the process approach, but are unable to do so due to lack of time. They all agree that one probably should let students redo and rework texts, but with the big classes today, that approach is simply not a viable option.

5.3 What Kind of Writing is Taught?

5.3.1 Introduction

The syllabi for English A and B are what control the different assignments. For natural reasons, assignments are shorter and easier in English A in comparison to English B.

5.3.2 Teacher A

Through the entire interview teacher A refers to the written production as “essays or other assignments”. It is hard to determine specifically what kind of writing is actually taught, although all writing is of the formal kind. In the beginning of the interview she states: “I never allow my students to just sit there and write creatively. I always tell them how to write.” Students are always given assignments that relate to what they have been reading and discussing earlier in class. Teacher A feels that by doing so the students will be able to produce good content. This also keeps the students motivated. A textbook is seldom used. Instead literature, articles and films serve as sources.

5.3.3 Teacher B

When teaching English A focus is put on simpler tasks like letters and other short assignments. These tasks are linked to what the students have been working with earlier in their textbooks. Most of the assignments come from textbooks; other sources are very seldom used.

In English B essays, articles and journals are common assignments. Students are asked to keep a reading journal in which they write ideas and thoughts connected to their current literature. What they write in the journal is to be the foundation of an essay written on the book they have read.

The only creative writing the students are allowed to do in class is poetry, and then only when the poetry section of the textbook is dealt with.

5.3.4 Teacher C

Assignments for students taking English A are more basic than those taking English B. At the start of English A teacher C gives her students a picture connected to the program they are taking and lets the students write freely to describe what they see. As mentioned earlier, summaries are common in English B. In general students are given free subjects to enhance motivation. Teacher C says: “Nowadays I think, if you want to teach writing, you should do it exactly the same as you would teach writing in a first language”.

Teacher C also believes that free writing is an excellent way to make students practice language. While most other parts of language teaching are divided into different parts, such as grammar, vocabulary or reading etc, free writing makes students practice the whole language. By doing so they must also consider what words to use, how to phrase what they want to say and organize their writing in such a way that they get their point across. She notes that students also get a chance to practice correct language according to the norms of writing.

5.3.5 Teacher D

The English A students write postcards addressed to the teacher, book reports based on books they have recently read and towards the end of the school year there will be an essay. The students in English B write different essays based on books and larger themes like teenagers, courage etc and summaries of longer texts. In general assignments are given as practice for the national test, in which writing is one of four parts. Had it not been for the big classes she would have liked the students to do more free writing in the form of stories etc. The essays are for the most part written in school with given subjects.

Even with the advanced students teacher D has found that many use a language that is too informal. This is why they practice essays several times throughout the semester. In order to get a good grade on the national test the students need a formal language, a good structure and good content in their essays.

5.3.6 Discussion

A lot of focus is put on essays in upper secondary school, and a reason for this may be the national test which has a separate day for writing an essay with given topics. Though students in English A write shorter and easier pieces than those in English B, the main focus is still laid on the formal parts of writing.

The control documents for upper secondary school and the syllabi for English A and B does not state what type of writing students should learn. On the contrary, these documents state what the students should gain from writing, but the way to achieve the goals is up to the teachers. It makes sense to have students practice the formal rules of writing, especially considering the research report conducted by the National Commission of Writing. But, the control documents on several occasions stress the importance of students writing according to various contexts. English should be functional, and though many of us do write an essay or two later in life many students go straight from upper secondary school to work, especially those studying in programs that qualify them for certain jobs (nurses, truck drivers, electricians etc). Though I certainly understand the importance of being able to write formally, I also believe there should be some opportunity for students to write informally as well. Even though the goals to be attained in English A state that students should be able to express themselves in different ways in writing, I think many would benefit from writing freely as well, without having a specific purpose.

5.4 What Are the Attitudes of the Teachers Towards Writing?

5.4.1 Introduction

The attitudes of the teacher have proven to be somewhat similar. They all agree writing is very important, though they have expressed different reasons for this statement. Most also say that having large classes is a huge problem, as it takes too much time to really go through and grade everything.

5.4.2 Teacher A

Early on teacher A establishes that she prioritizes writing as she “thinks it is a good idea”. If she had a smaller class she also says that speaking would be valued, but as the situation is now she does not have the time to do so.

5.4.3 Teacher B

Teacher B speaks fondly of writing and states that: “the dream would be to hold a writing course for those who are interested”. Teaching writing is easy, according to teacher B, and she takes much pleasure in seeing her students’ progress. The only downside is the time it takes to read through and correct.

5.4.4 Teacher C

When asked if she would change anything if she had complete freedom of choice, teacher C responded that she would not alter anything even if she did not have to consider the syllabi. As stated earlier she feels that writing is an excellent way for students to practice language, which is also why she spends so much lesson time on writing. She also likes teaching writing, which makes it easier. Besides being a good way to judge language ability teacher C has also found that shy students seem to open up when writing. She believes they experience writing as freer than speaking, and there is less pressure in an anonymous piece of writing than saying something in front of the entire class.

5.4.5 Teacher D

Teacher D likes to teach writing, but as the grading and marking takes time it is hard to do as much as she would like to. Also, reading an essay with the same topic as twenty others may feel tiresome, which is also a reason to why they write only once a month.

5.4.6 Discussion

All teachers seem to have positive attitudes towards writing in itself, though executing different kinds of writing assignments are stressful as well. Writing takes time, both to teach and to practice. Teacher A explained that the time issue is why her students are given assignments to do at home. Teacher D mentioned that reading and assessing 30 or more written pieces is time consuming and mentally exhausting.

Despite this the teachers seem to think writing is fun to teach and many say they would like to do it more often if there was enough time. That is certainly pleasant to hear.

5.5 How Is the Written Production Assessed?

5.5.1 Introduction

All teachers assess the work of their students, though they do it in different ways. Some have tried peer response and discussion groups, but the general opinion is that there is not enough time to thoroughly write and rework a text once it has been written.

5.5.2 Teacher A

When it comes to the assessment and correction of students' writing assignments teacher A has developed a system based on a scale from zero to six. The principle is, the higher the number the better the written production is. These numbers are given within three categories, which are language, content and organization. Only if a student is given 0 as a grade has the student failed, which means that 1 and higher is considered a pass. The benefit with this is that students are allowed to see exactly how they have done in a particular field and they see what areas they need to work with.

Students are also given sample essays to show what a 6-6-6 essay looks like etc. This also enables students to see how a good essay should be organized and what kind of language is appropriate. When it comes to content, it should be relevant to the subject given.

5.5.3 Teacher B

According to teacher B she never grades assignments that are not official essays. She does mark the errors, though, and leaves a comment at the end. Often there is no time for students to rework texts or discuss with fellow classmates. Instead teacher B hands the written production back and the students are free to do what they want with it. Though no grade is given to the students the work is still graded in order for the teacher to have something to base the course grade on. The normal grade system (G, VG and MVG) is used at all times. When it comes to essays a grade is given based on grammar, vocabulary and content.

5.5.4 Teacher C

Everything is marked except homework. At the bottom of the assignment a summary is written to let the student know what needs to be checked for next time. Common mistakes include verbs and tense. Not everything that is wrong is pointed out, just one or two things, so that the student will not be overwhelmed. Generally the students want the teacher to write what is wrong. When only the mistakes were underlined the students told teacher C that they did not know what they had done wrong. Much effort is put in the assessing and grading of written production.

It is always the teacher who assesses the students' work. Peer response does not work, in her opinion, and she does not want to waste time by doing it.

When grading the written production teacher C uses the normal Swedish grade system. All in all, writing makes up for 60-70 % of the entire English course grade.

5.5.5 Teacher D

The students in teacher D's classes want everything graded; otherwise they ask her why the grade is missing. She has used peer response on some occasions, but the students seem keener to know what grade they have received rather than discussing what was good or bad about their texts. It takes time to read and grade written material, and that is one of the reasons why she does not let her class write more freely.

When assessing the students' written material the teacher comments on language, structure and content in order that the students know what to improve. She also tries to talk to each student a few moments alone in the corridor about their writing. When the assignments are graded the normal Swedish grade system is used.

To help the students gain their own understanding of how the grading works teacher D has presented different essays taken from Skolverket. The students read the essays and then give them a grade of their own. Most of the times the students give lower grades than the teachers! Afterwards they discuss the difference between Skolverket's grade and the students' grades. In the final grade writing counts for approximately 35 %, according to this teacher.

5.5.6 Discussion

Teachers grade and assess the written assignments very differently. While teacher A has her own system with three areas of assessment and her own grade system, teacher B hardly grades anything she gives back to her students. Both teachers C and D mark some of the errors and add some comments at the end of the text.

The question with grading and assessing is whether or not it serves its purpose. If there is no time to rework already written texts, do the students benefit from the grades and the comments? DeLuca (280) discusses this problem and comes to the conclusion that most students only look at the grade before discarding the paper. But on the other hand, not giving students a grade or comment may discourage them from continuing to write. A good grade and an encouraging comment may work as positive motivation. Another question is whether or not students remember comments and errors on a previous paper when it is time to write a new one? In that case individual talks, like teacher D practices, may be a good way for the students to remember more.

The most interesting thing I found is the difference in the importance of writing when it comes to the final grade. One teacher believes that what students achieve in writing accounts for at least 50 % of the grade while another says that writing is 35 % of the grade. Teacher C believes that through free writing she really sees the true knowledge of language that the student possesses and that may be the reason why half the final grade is based on writing.

6 Conclusion

In this essay I have researched how writing is taught in upper secondary school. The aim of this paper was to see how writing was carried out, what kind of writing was taught, what the teachers think about teaching writing and how written production is assessed.

Through recorded interviews with four different teachers I have gathered information. I have also carried out extensive reading of earlier research in order to get a complete background.

I found that a variety of different methods are used when it comes to the teaching of writing. The most common ones are the paragraph-pattern approach and the grammar-syntax-organization approach. Only one of the four teachers uses free writing as a method. All teachers have lessons before giving the assignment where the rules of formal writing are gone through.

Formal writing is focused on by all teachers, mainly due to the national tests. Essays are written several times each term, especially in English B. Students are given easier assignments in English A, but focus is still laid on the formal aspects.

All teachers enjoy teaching writing. More time and smaller classes would be better in order for them to teach more effectively, but all think writing is important and fairly easy to teach.

Teacher A grades her students' essays according to language, content and organization. Grades may vary between 0 and 6. Language, content and organization are also used by teacher D, although she uses the normal Swedish grading system. Teacher B does not grade anything handed back to students, but leaves an encouraging comment at the end. The same method is used by teacher C, with the exception of the marking of errors.

It is satisfying to see that writing is an important part of second language learning, and that teachers view it as such as well. A great deal of time is spent on the teaching of writing, though smaller classes and more time would ensure an even better education. Researching and writing this essay has provided me with many ideas and much inspiration for the future.

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8 Appendix 1

8.1 Interview questions

How do you teach writing?

If the syllabi could be disregarded, would you teach writing in another way?

How much time do you estimate you spend on planning and executing the teaching of writing?

What kind of writing do you teach?

How do you assess the written production?

How much of the entire English grade does writing account for?