Keeping up with the High-Ability Students

Teachers’ Perspectives on Helping High-Ability Students in Mixed-Ability English Classes
Abstract

This paper aimed to investigate how English teachers in junior high school help and motivate high-ability students to develop their potentials in mixed-ability English classrooms. Five junior high school English teachers from two different schools in Southern Sweden participated in this study. The method used to carry out the investigation was qualitative, with in–depth, semi-structured interviews. Results showed that the participants found that it was difficult to focus their attention on high-ability students in a mixed-ability setting. However, the participants have been positive to have high-ability students in a classroom because they serve as good role models to inspire their classmates. In addition, it was found that teachers prepare various materials with different levels of difficulty to suit to the differing needs of their students. Although the term differentiated instruction was not used by the participants of the study, it was, in fact, the approach they used to motivate their students. It is not possible to recommend best practices for dealing with high-ability students because what works with one student does not automatically work with other students. Furthermore, teachers reported that many high-ability students do not want to have differentiated instruction. This appears to be one of the hindrances to helping high-ability students develop their potentials.

Keywords: English language teaching, mixed-ability, high-ability, differentiated instruction
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1 INTRODUCTION

The Swedish school syllabus states that teaching should adapt to each student’s abilities and needs. It should encourage learning and knowledge development based on the learner’s background, previous experiences, language and knowledge (LGR11:8). This is a school mandate to see to it that no child is left behind (U.S Department of Education [www]). Just as no two teachers teach in the same way, no two students learn in the same way. It is, therefore, interesting to study how teachers in mixed-ability classrooms deal with the differing needs of students in their classes. As stated in the school syllabus, schools should strive to develop students’ willingness and desire to learn (LGR11:10).

In Sweden, English is formally taught from the third grade, but many students have already been exposed to the language before this formal teaching. Perhaps this is the reason why there is such variation in students’ English. Thus, while some students are having their first experience of the language, others have already developed an ear for the language. Some students have become adept at writing while others use the language as if it is their mother tongue. In fact, some students have already secured a grade A in courses long before the end of the school year (Alastair 2014:94). One challenge for teachers then is to encourage, challenge and guide more able students in English. Teachers are expected to create activities that are stimulating and can propel the more advanced learners’ intellectual development forward. The Swedish National Agency for Education makes it clear that all students have the right to develop to their full potential (LGR11:10). The ideal is that all students should have a sense of purpose when they step inside the classroom. If students have no sense of purpose, then there is a risk that they will become bored, unmotivated and unruly in class.

While it is a commendable idea to help advanced students in English advance further, teachers are unlikely to offer their undivided attention to these students since there are other students who are in greater need of the teacher’s assistance in order to meet the learning outcomes of the syllabus. This is a daily dilemma in a mixed-ability English class. When students with different needs are put together in one classroom, it creates challenges for teacher and students alike. Van Der Veer (2007:79) has an assumption about why more able children profit less from school instruction. He assumes that more able children do not get stimulated and the lessons are not challenging for them. He emphasizes that students learn little from doing tasks that are below their intellectual level. Learners should get mentally challenged by lessons
and activities. Failure to challenge more able students will result in boredom and lack of interest; hence, teachers must engage and motivate all students.

**Aim**

The aim of this study was to investigate how some junior high school English teachers work to help and motivate high-ability students develop their potential in mixed-ability English classes. This study answered the following research questions:

(a) What are the teachers’ opinions about having high-ability students in a mixed-ability class?

(b) What methods and activities do teachers use to challenge high-ability students in English?

(c) What are the difficulties and benefits that these teachers encounter in motivating and challenging high-ability students in English in a mixed-ability class?
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the school’s duties is to encourage all pupils to find their unique individuality (LGR11: 7). It is reiterated in the school syllabus that democratic education, individual development and learning in the context of an equal education is the central idea of schools. Schools should stimulate students' creativity, curiosity, confidence and willingness to test their own ideas and solve problems (LGR11: 9). All students, without any exemptions, should be given opportunities to hone their knowledge. In respect to the child’s individuality, schools aim to help each child understand and succeed in a rapidly-changing society.

2.1 The Zone of Proximal Development

Van der Veer summarizes Vygotsky’s educational theory as the relation between instruction and general development. According to Van der Veer, it is unfortunate that in terms of newly gained knowledge and skills, high-ability students apparently profit less from school. This is because “the instruction that is crucial for their chronological age is simply too easy as their mental age is higher than the average” (2007:79). More advanced students need to be challenged to reach their maximum potential. By giving the more advanced students learning materials that can challenge their mental ability, teachers are helping them to raise their intellectual level. Tasks that are pitched below or at the intellectual level of the learners are viewed as not so stimulating (ibid: 79-80). To sufficiently stimulate students’ development, they should be given tasks that are above their intellectual level but still within the zone of proximal development (ibid: 81). Putting this in a school context, students should get to do tasks that can challenge them but which they can manage provided they get adequate help. Often, regular instruction in school does not create a new zone of proximal development for more advanced students, and they lose interest (ibid: 84). To keep the students’ thirst for knowledge alive, their mind should be challenged with something that can lead them to new learnings and discoveries. Educators should make themselves available in leading students to reach understanding of the things around them. This is the theory of the zone of proximal development popularized by Lev Vygotsky. As explained by Van der Veer, the zone of proximal development refers to

[…] functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturing, functions that mature tomorrow, that now are still in their embryonic form; functions that cannot
be called the fruits of development, but the buds of development, the flowers of development, i.e. that which is only just maturing (ibid:81).

If the regular instruction in school does not create a new zone of proximal development for high-ability students, they will not reach their full potential (Van der Veer 2007: 84). To give learners a task that has already been mastered is nothing but a damaging way of making them think that schoolwork is boring and can hardly scratch the surface of their interests. Undeniably, teachers have a strong impact on the children’s learning. Over the years, the word teacher has been assigned different connotations. As far as Vygotsky’s view is concerned, he sees the teacher as more of an organizer of the social aspects in the classroom encouraging students to be active in the learning process (Lindquist 1999:248). In this regard, teachers should be more of a supervisor rather than a lecturer (ibid: 73). For Vygotsky, education should aim to develop thinking and it has to create challenges that can develop the child’s mental ability. Vygotsky believed that teaching should allow students to attain new learning and discoveries. In addition, students should be encouraged to be proactive in the learning process. With the help of a teacher as a facilitator, students can attain higher levels of learning (ibid: 135).

2.2 Students’ English Proficiency

It is no surprise that there are students who perform well in English at school. Pettersson and Wester (2014:514) claim that Swedish students’ knowledge in English is impressive. The test, Assessment of English which was conducted on November 2012 by The European Network of Policymakers for the Evaluation of Education Systems, revealed that Swedish students topped the test, surpassing 7 other countries such as Denmark, Finland, France, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Germany. The results showed that Swedish students excelled in reading and listening. Swedish students’ results in speaking were better than their writing; however, they came out on top overall. Similarly, the International Language Study conducted in 2011 showed that Swedish students have had a high level of English proficiency (ibid: 515).

2.3 High–Ability Students

Wallström (2012) explains why some gifted students do not feel motivated and inspired to show their capability. She asserts that educators’ role in moulding gifted students’ potentials cannot be underestimated. She further states that gifted students, who are fortunate enough to
have teachers who know how to deal with their giftedness, realize not only their potential but also enhance their confidence. However, students who have teachers who do not know how to approach gifted students, choose to hide their giftedness (2012: 8-9). Additionally, Wallström mentions that some teachers are unwilling or unable to change their routines and be more flexible with their approaches (2012:72). These teachers can hinder gifted students’ opportunity to develop their abilities. All students, less able and able alike, deserve teachers who will push them every day to realize their potential. Wallström suggests in her research that there are five to 10 percent of students who fall into the category of needing more challenging material (ibid: 26).

Lewis et al. (2012: 25) observed that if students who are gifted in English are not appropriately challenged, then their ability to reach their utmost potential diminishes. According to their description of gifted students, they are those students who demonstrate both above-average academic ability and high task commitment (ibid: 25). This study does not focus on the differences between high achievers and gifted students. The term high-ability student has been used here as a unifying label to designate this section of the student population.

2.4 Mixed Ability Grouping

Bailey and Bridges (1983:4) define mixed ability classes as groups reflecting the full range of ability in the school based on the principle of equal respect for each child as an individual. According to Bailey and Bridges, mixed-ability grouping reinforces social integration, social cohesion, community, mutual understanding, mutual respect, mutual support, tolerance, cooperation and equality (ibid: 22). In addition, mixed-ability grouping is assumed to be helpful in preventing the rejection of less able students as implied in streaming (ibid: 19). This source may seem old but is pertinent in tracing the history of the concept mixed-ability grouping.

There are other scholars who favor mixed-ability grouping. Xanthou and Pavlou (2008: 1) define mixed-ability grouping as gathering children of high, medium and low abilities in the same group. They explain that mixed-ability classes provide pupils an access to more learning opportunities and the educator’s job is to engage all pupils in the lesson regardless of their abilities. Xanthou and Pavlou favor mixed-ability classes because less able students have opportunities to be assisted by more able students. By mixing students, it reduces the risk for the disadvantaged pupils to be stigmatized as less able (ibid: 4).

The Swedish National Agency for Education reiterates the importance of inclusive schools by stipulating that school should be characterized by a democratic community where
all pupils are involved, and have the opportunity to develop and learn and where differences are seen as an asset. Sweden has signed an International Policy Document stating the commitment of Swedish schools to work for the development of inclusive schooling (Skolverket [www]). This is because schools are anchored to the belief that all students have equal value (LGR 11:7).

2.5 Differentiated Instruction

One of the teaching methods that some teachers use today in a mixed-ability classroom is differentiated instruction. Blaz (2016:2) states that differentiated instruction is a term that encompasses a wide range of teaching strategies. She explains that differentiated instruction is complex and flexible with many ways to accommodate different teaching styles as well as students’ differences in learning styles, interests, prior knowledge, socialization needs, comfort zones, level of engagement/readiness and technology that students have access (ibid: 3). For differentiated instruction to work well, teachers must identify the differences in students. Then, teachers make adjustments according to how individual students will benefit most and facilitate best learning in the classroom (ibid: 5).

Lewis et al. (2012:31) conclude that differentiated instruction opposes a one-size fits-all mind-set to classroom teaching. For them, differentiation means that classroom instruction is designed to match each student’s readiness level, interest level and learning style. In this approach, the teacher utilizes a variety of methods to help each student meet the learning outcomes of the syllabus. According to Lewis and her colleagues, differentiation provides an opportunity for students to show what they have come to know, understand, or be able to do (ibid: 32). Principally, differentiated instruction requires the teacher to plan and prepare ahead of time and shift into a facilitator’s role when the students get into the classroom.
3 METHOD AND SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

This chapter provides a detailed account of how the investigation was conducted including data gathering, selection of participants, pilot testing and ethical considerations. It also includes the limitations of the research approach.

3.1 Method

The method used for data collection in this qualitative study was semi-structured interviews. According to Alvehus (2013:80), an interview method is used when one is trying to find out how people think, feel and act in different situations. It is also “a way to access a person’s opinions, feelings, experiences and thoughts” (Alvehus, 2013:81); hence, interviews were used in this study. The interviews were semi-structured and guide questions were prepared in advance. Semi-structured interviews give the interviewee freedom to articulate his/her answers (Hwang and Nilsson 2011: 82). The interview was done face to face and follow up or probing questions were asked. All interviews were done privately, just between the two parties involved, i.e., the interviewee or the participant and the interviewer. This was to ensure that the participants would feel as comfortable as possible in sharing their opinions. An interview method was chosen over a questionnaire method because the researcher had a chance to ask follow up questions in cases where some explanations needed to be clarified. This flexibility in asking open-ended and probing questions in semi-structured interviews allows qualitative researchers to gather rich and in-depth data. This, of course, cannot be done when one is conducting an investigation using questionnaires (Hwang and Nilsson 2011:82).

3.1.1 Gathering of Data

At the interview, the participants read the Participant Consent Letter (see Appendix A). Then, they signed the paper, and the researcher proceeded with the interview. A mobile phone was used to record the interview which was also explained in the Participant Consent Letter. The researcher decided to not take down notes during the interview so as to give full attention to what the participant was sharing. The interview started with some background questions such as the participants’ age, education and previous teaching-related experiences. Warm up questions lead to a smooth opening (Larsen 2007: 86). In this study, the participants were given options whether to have the interview in English or in Swedish. Two of the participants chose English and the remaining three chose “Swenglish”, a combination of Swedish and English. The Swenglish interviews allowed the researcher to ask the participants questions in
Swedish but in situations when the language was not clear, both parties agreed to translate the question into English. Most of the time, the participants who chose Swenglish interviews answered the questions in Swedish. This strategy functioned well as Swedish is not the researcher’s mother tongue. When all of the participants had been interviewed, the gathered data were then transcribed. The transcribed data were read through several times and analysed. Highlighters were used to categorise and analyse the gathered data. Furthermore, those data were underscored according to themes (teachers’ opinions, methods and activities, and difficulties encountered by the teachers).

3.1.2 Ethical Considerations
Based on the guidelines of ethical questions taken from Utvecklingspsykologi by Philip Hwang and Björn Nilsson (2011:87), there are four ethical principles that should be observed, namely: the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement and the usage requirement. Information requirement means that the researcher must inform the participants about the purpose of the study. In addition, the participants should know that their participation is voluntary and that they have the right to terminate the interview should they wish to do so (ibid: 87). The consent requirement denotes that the participants in the study have decided to be involved (ibid: 87). In this research study, the participants were not coerced to join but rather cordially asked. As all the participants in this research were consenting adults, their decision to participate in the study was based on their personal decision. The confidentiality requirement implies that all personal information of the participants should be treated with utmost confidentiality (ibid: 87). In this study, the participants were assured that no one, apart from the researcher and the researcher’s supervisor, had access to all the raw materials such as recorded interview and participants’ true identities. The usage requirement means that the information collected about the participants should only be used for research purposes (ibid: 87). This was also stated in the Participant Consent Letter.

The interview questions were first tried out in a pilot interview. Since the researcher was new to qualitative interviewing, doing a trial interview was a necessary first step. The pilot interview was beneficial in ironing out and improving the interview questions. Through the pilot interview, the researcher was reminded to refrain from asking “why” questions, since these questions would invite interviewees to do the analysis work for the researcher on the spot. The pilot interview also gave a general picture for how the actual interviews would go.
Furthermore, the participant in the pilot interview was a middle school English substitute teacher and was also writing a thesis.

3.2 Selection of participants

The participants in this study were junior high school teachers working in two different schools in the same town in Southern Sweden. The researcher, who was once a high school teacher in the Philippines and in Thailand and had taught English in streamed, homogenous classes would like to find out about teachers’ experiences of teaching English in mixed-ability classes and how these teachers give help to high-ability students. This gave the researcher an idea to focus the study only on junior high school teachers. All of the participants were qualified teachers and their experience in teaching English ranged from 10-22 years. These five participants were the only ones who agreed to be part of this study among all the junior high school English teachers who received an inquiry. This method of choosing participants is what Larsen (2007:77) refers to as selection according to self-selection. The aims of this study were not divulged to the participants. All they knew was that the interview would be about mixed ability English classes. By not telling the participants what the main aim of the study was, the answers appeared to be more authentic and spontaneous.

3.2.1 Subjects

Throughout this study, the true identity of the five participants was withheld, thus, pseudonyms have been used instead. The first interview was performed on the 21st of October 2016 and the last one was on the 9th of November 2016. Below is the table showing the relevant demographic profile of the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Courses Taught</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janni</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Swedish, English and Language Reinforcement</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>English, Swedish and Language Reinforcement</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Swedish, English and Language Reinforcement</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Swedish, English and French</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>English, Spanish and English as an elective course</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Janni, Emily and Joy work in a school with more than 300 students. On the other hand, Sarah and Anna work at another school with 600 students. It was not intentional to have all female participants.

3.3 Problems and Limitations
The original plan of the researcher was to choose eight English teachers from all three junior high schools in one of the small towns in Sweden. Initially, eight invitations were sent out to eight English teachers in three different high schools. The researcher just randomly chose teachers who would receive an invitation. Only two were interested to be part of the study, two politely declined the invitation and the remaining four did not bother to reply. The poor response to the invitation for participation prompted the researcher to send out invitations to all junior high school teachers in the particular town. This means that eight more invitations were sent out in which three got a positive response, two were declined and the remaining three did not receive any reply. This summed up to having five willing participants from just two schools out of the three target schools. The number of participants may seem narrow but is deemed sufficient to reaching the aim of this paper. It would, of course, have been better to have a wider spectrum of participants (maximum of eight according to the University guide) but convincing prospective participants to join in was not easy. Lack of time was the main reason of those teachers who declined to be part of this investigation. Nevertheless, the five participants provided ample stories about their experiences as English teachers in a mixed ability classroom so that the aims of this study could be achieved.

3.3.1 Limitations
This research is qualitative in form which means that the gathered information was solely based on the personal experiences of those who took part in this study. Therefore, the findings of this research cannot be generalized to a wider group. For clarification, the five participants cannot represent all teachers in Sweden. Notwithstanding that, this study may offer an insight to English teachers, particularly new graduates who wish to have a guide when it comes to handling high achievers who are placed in their charge. Even teachers who have been in a teaching profession for a long time may also benefit by considering some of the perspectives from this study for their classes. Furthermore, policymakers and school administrators may use this study for internal discussions and as a point of reference for future decisions.
4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings as well as the analysis of the investigation. The gathered data are divided and analysed based on three themes, namely the teachers’ definition of high-ability students, methods used by the teachers to motivate high-ability students and difficulties and benefits encountered by these teachers in challenging their high-ability students.

4.1 Teachers’ Definition of High-Ability Students

All of the participants have high-ability students in their classes. The five participants agree that it is easy to spot students who have high ability in English. For these teachers, high-ability students are those who, more often than not, have top grades, are really good at speaking, understand the language in both oral and written forms, have a wide vocabulary, good grammar and are creative and active in class. Mostly, these students are fast finishers and they ask questions that make a teacher think.

One can detect that a student is smart through the way he/she asks questions (Emily, my translation).

Often, these high ability students are in need of tasks that can challenge them. Anna sometimes assumes that the tasks she gives to her advanced students are already challenging enough but when she offers it to them, they say, “This is too easy”.

4.2 Teachers’ Experiences in Having High-Ability Students

The five participants agree that mixed-ability grouping is good for the students. However, Janni suggests that mixed-ability grouping is not always positive even for the least advanced students. Students may feel insecure to participate in a large group especially if others are obviously better than them. However, in general, most students benefit from each other when they are together.

Mixed-ability class works but it is difficult when it is only you. We can’t divide them like say, the low achievers in one group, the middle achievers in one group and the high achievers in another group. We can only do that temporarily. But teachers have to also constantly think about the high-ability students and not let them stand back just to help the others and that’s the problem I think because most of the time we do not challenge the high-ability students enough. If we have all abilities together, it does
more good than bad. As far as my experience is concerned, when I had this class with low achievers there was nothing to lift them (Janni).

Even if all the teachers say that it is difficult to challenge the high-ability students in a mixed-group, they still prefer this kind of system over streaming (where students are grouped according to their ability). All of the five participants are unanimous in claiming that it is in the best interests of the students to learn together. In addition, Janni claims that grouping students may hurt the self-esteem of those who are not fast learners. Emily and Joy suggest that language learning should occur in a social context. If there are two students in a class who are really good at English and if they are pulled out and put in one classroom, then these students get deprived of socialisation. In addition, high ability students found it boring to be sitting in another room, doing other tasks while the rest of the class is discussing or doing the same lesson. Joy mentions that when high ability students are grouped together, they feel tensed in the classroom.

We did it before, like we grouped the students according to their ability. I noticed that the top group had a fairly strained atmosphere. It took them several months before they got comfortable with each other. Everyone was smart and suddenly there was tension in the classroom. The quality? Yes, it was good quality because there was a real conversation. (Joy, my translation)

Janni, Joy, Anna and Emily say that they have tried pulling out high-ability students to let them do different tasks in one room. According to these teachers, this strategy is good sometimes, when students themselves ask for it and also if the teacher deems it necessary to segregate the students. However, grouping the students according to their ability for a long period of time is not allowed because of the Swedish National Agency for Education’s directive. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule like for instance the case of some immigrant children who need to be segregated for a period of time (Skolverket [www]). Janni and Joy state that they were reprimanded by the Swedish National Agency for Education for grouping the students.

We had tried to group the students, like one group for the top students, one for the average ones and one for the struggling students. The Swedish National Agency for
Education reacted to it and said that they did not agree with what we were doing (Janni).

4.3 Teachers’ Various Methods in Challenging High-Ability Students

All of the participants, even with their long teaching experience, find it challenging to motivate high-ability students in a mixed-ability setting. Notwithstanding that, they all describe different techniques and methods that have worked in some cases.

4.3.1 Advanced Reading Materials and Tests

Anna, Emily, Joy and Sarah try to give high-ability students advanced English materials and even English courses designed for senior high school students. Anna even borrows advanced books in the local library and offers them to her students. This is to ensure that high-ability students are also taken care of in a mixed group class.

I have 8th graders who are really good and they have done the 9th grade books and I have contacted the upper secondary school and got all books that we can use. I also have been to the library in town to borrow some books that are advanced. (Anna)

Even giving advanced tests like national tests that are available on the Internet is considered by some teachers to be a good tool to motivate high-ability students.

We can actually motivate the 8th graders to do the National test. The digital reading and digital skills and self-evaluation that you can find on the Internet can be used just to see which level they are at. (Emily, my translation)

Anna mentions that the textbook they are using has many exercises and this is good for fast learners. When they are done with one activity, they can do the next. The students do not get idle when they are in the classroom as there are many activities that will keep them busy and get challenged.

There are many exercises in the book and I haven’t known anyone in my class who has done all the exercises. Students can do the exercises according to their pace. They can move on to the next when they are done. This is good when you are teaching in a mixed-ability group. (Anna)
4.3.2 Available Materials on the Internet

All five participants take advantage of the available materials on the Internet.

My favourite is actually when I can find something interesting on the Internet. We can listen to something or watch a YouTube clip and then discuss and learn new words. I think students like that too and you can find lots of materials on the Internet. (Anna)

Sarah, Emily, Anna and Janni say that what they usually do is choose a text from the Internet and they make different levels of difficulty out of the chosen text.

I guess variation is important. Variation in lessons, variation in written activities and variation in difficulty levels are important. Teachers should always see to it that there are materials suited for everyone’s background knowledge. Teachers should also be flexible with their approach. It is good to prepare texts with different levels of difficulty so students can choose. (Emily, my translation)

Emily reiterates that it is important to always prepare extra work for the fast finishers.

The thing is that high-ability students are always the fast finishers. In my case, I always prepare extra seatwork activities. There are many programs on the Internet with different difficulty levels. There is always a, b, c text and grammar exercises so I let them do those. (Emily, my translation)

Some teachers go “more authentic” in their approach. Take, for instance, Joy who uses Skype Mysteries because it offers more authentic communication. With this kind of activity, Joy thinks students get challenged since all of the students have an assigned task. She feels that everybody has a fair chance to develop their language skills. Joy explains that this kind of activity is “good for those students who are looking for more challenges and it is really fun and students like it”.

4.3.3 Researching, Reporting, Interviewing and Making Films

Anna, Sarah and Janni ask their students to do research, game presentations, discovery presentations, interviews and make movies that can be done outside class. Janni states that teachers should use these high-ability students’ creativity.
They interviewed some people, some teachers about spirits and ghosts. They actually made movies which were very exciting. So, you can actually make them do things like that. Be more creative because they are creative. It is important to meet everyone at their level and let them develop their skills further (Janni).

Janni mentions that one of her high-ability students showed no interest in doing the usual written work. Since the child has a passion for computer games, he was then challenged to write something about games and his own discoveries. The student was also asked to present his discoveries in class. Furthermore, in Anna’s class, she allows her students to discuss their ideas and do tasks that they want to do.

There is this one student in my class who does digging of information about the US presidential election and she will present this in class (Anna).

4.3.4 Vocabulary Enrichment, Grammar Lessons and Writing Exercises
All of the five participants agree that when they offer their high-ability students something to read, they make sure that the text contains advanced words. In this way, the students get to increase their vocabulary. According to Sarah and Emily, they challenge their high-ability students to learn more advanced words, advanced grammar and practice more in writing. They acknowledge that many of their fast learners in English have learnt English through games and that the kind of English that they have is “everyday English”. Sarah argues that these students need to also learn more words, and do grammar exercises to develop what they already know.

High-ability students become bored when they don’t get challenged. Many of them have learnt English through computer games. They are really good especially in speaking English. However, they have simple vocabulary. (Sarah, my translation)

Emily mentions that she focuses more on enriching these students’ vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Students should be encouraged to develop their potential by giving them current texts. Emily, Joy and Sarah mention that there are students who are really good at speaking but they have difficulty in writing. Their speaking skills do not match up with their writing skills. These teachers believe that it is good for these students to get more grammar, vocabulary and writing training. This, however, does not mean to say that these teachers focus
more on writing. As Joy and Emily mentioned in the interview, language is communication so students should be given ample chances to speak in English and at the same time enough time to put their thoughts into writing. There should be a good balance between the two skills.

Vocabulary and grammar are important and these are the difficult ones. Students need good vocabulary for a better understanding and communication. There are many things that these high-ability students can learn more in school. They should also be able to spell correctly. (Emily, my own translation)

4.4 Hindrances in Helping High-Ability Students

The teachers acknowledge that there are some hindrances in their desire to help high-ability students in a mixed group. These are time constraints, large class sizes, and students’ reluctance to do different work.

4.4.1 Time Constraints

Anna explains that what works with one student does not necessarily work with everybody. To have various or differentiated activities, a teacher needs time to prepare. However, these teachers experience that sometimes they do not have enough time to really ponder, formulate activities and plan lessons that are suited for the range of learners in their class.

Adequate time for planning is necessary on our part. If I had enough time, I could have prepared tasks that were maybe better and suited to everyone. (Sarah, my translation)

Preparing an individualized task takes time. As all of these participants have said, they want to be fair to all students. This means that when preparing lessons, these teachers have to think of all the students’ needs, not just the needs of the high achievers.

I think you need to try something that works for everybody. If we talk about the high-ability students, we need to try something that they like, that is fun to do on their own level. But that is difficult to find because that is individual. Time is needed to discover new programs and activities that can open up smart kids’ interests. It is not easy. You have to think for them and that is stressful because there is no time and how do I do it? (Anna)
Joy also admits that time is one of the hindrances in helping students. She said that in a normal classroom situation, a teacher has just 25-30 remaining minutes after a presentation and these remaining minutes go to those who raise their hands. According to Joy, there is no time left for the rest of the students. Janni mentions that struggling students take up so much time and she admits that sometimes there is no time left to challenge the high-ability students.

There’s not a whole lot of attention left. Say, in my class, there are many high-ability students and there are quite a few low achievers but still they take up so much of my time. It is a bit hard to challenge the high ability students because of lack of time. Take for instance, this one smart student in my class. He doesn’t take up much space in the classroom. He doesn’t get challenged in the classroom in the way he should be. He gets in the background a bit and that is something I struggle with very hard: to get him or to try to make time for those students. (Janni)

4.4.2 Large Class Sizes

All five participants think that the classes are large; however, one teacher thinks there is no need to make smaller classes. Instead, more teachers could be added in the classroom. According to Janni, a two-teacher system may work better.

If we could have more teachers in the classrooms, like two teachers in every class, we could do collaborative teaching. It would be like, one teacher would walk around and grab students who need help and talk to them and listen to them and see them, one by one, one at a time, and motivate them, and just reach out for them. So having more teachers in the classroom or more teachers involved would be a dream. Twenty five students and two teachers, that would be perfect because then you could divide the students sometimes if necessary and other times you could work together more but in different levels in the classroom. But then we can’t get enough teachers. There aren’t enough teachers. (Janni)

All of the participants agree that classes are large which normally consist of 25-27 students.

Our classes are large. Fifteen to 17 would be good. Not too many but also not too few. As a teacher, you can catch up with students if the class is not too big. (Joy, my translation)
All of the participants believe that they have to divide their attention between students. Emily mentions that she always wants to be fair with her students by not just focusing her attention on the struggling ones and that she tries to move around the classroom and offer help to those who need it. However, the participants feel that it is a really difficult situation. Joy, Janni, Anna admit that they tend to give more attention to struggling students. As Janni said, the low achievers are the main focus in a mixed-ability class. Anna thinks it is a difficult situation because sometimes she gets preoccupied in helping other students while some high-ability students come to her and ask for another exercise.

Well, it could be difficult. Sometimes, the high-ability students come to me and say, “Well, we want to do something else. We already know this. Give us something else”. But I can’t think of anything. I’m in the middle of helping another student (Anna).

4.4.3 Students’ Refusal to Offer
Sarah, Anna, Joy and Janni agree that it is sometimes hard to motivate high-ability students to learn new things because they think that they already know everything. These teachers think that it is so frustrating when students refuse their offers of differentiated work. They also feel defeated when they have tried everything they could, and it seems that the students do not see the point of doing it. Anna has offered her high-ability students the possibility to read advanced books and share the story in class but the students refused.

I have actually proposed a research project to my two gifted girls but they said no. I don’t know if it is the modern time or just laziness. It can be fun and I have talked to them about the project. They could do it together and present it in class but they said no. It’s a pity really but I have tried (Anna).

Some high-ability students as Emily said are just lazy or maybe they need convincing. She also believes that these students should not be expected to behave like adults. They are just students who happen to be good at something and they should be given proper guidance and challenges. Sometimes, high-ability students do not feel motivated to really try harder especially when they know that they have already done what is needed to get an A.

High-ability students may think that they do not need to give all their effort to something that they know they are already good at. They think that, “Ah, I already have
an A grade, so what? And there are smart students who are underachievers. However, they can feel that, “Oh, I’m getting closer to my goal. I know what I need to do”. When they feel like that, then, they get that sort of motivation and then they become high achievers. (Emily, my translation)

The five participants agree that the teacher’s willingness to help high-ability students can have better results if students themselves know how to cooperate. As these teachers have encountered, their efforts are sometimes unmatched by the students’ lack of willingness to cooperate. Sometimes, this unwillingness to do extra work may be because they feel bored doing a certain task alone.

4.5 Discussion
This section presents the discussion of the research results. The theory of the zone of proximal development and views regarding mixed-ability grouping and differentiated instructions will be linked to the result.

4.5.1 Mixed is Good
The informants in this study confirmed the claim of Bailey and Bridges that mixed-ability grouping reinforces social integration and is helpful in preventing the rejection of the less able students (1983:19). All five participants are united in their idea that students learn from each other. High-ability students function as examples in the classroom and at the same time students learn from each other, become more tolerant of each other and show mutual respect and understanding. These good sides of mixed-ability grouping were mentioned by Bailey and Bridges (1983) who argue that mixed-ability grouping does more good than bad to students. Moreover, the participants’ opinion why they prefer mixed-ability grouping over grouping according to abilities matches with the ideas of Pavlou and Xanthou (2008) who favor mixed ability classes. These authors posit that less able students have opportunities to be assisted by more able students. However, the participants claim that mixed-ability grouping also has a number of drawbacks such as teachers have to teach to an average level, not too advanced and not too easy. This implies that the most able students do not immediately get challenged by this kind of instruction and also the less able students do not always understand the discussion. For these teachers, it is always a complex situation but they have experimented with several ways to help high-ability students develop their abilities. The participants claimed that mixed-ability grouping is not easy for the teachers to do well, but good for the students if teachers do it well.
4.5.2 Differentiated Instruction

As shown in the results, the participants try to individualise their instruction by preparing different instructional materials that will suit the differing needs of the students. In the entire interview, none of these teachers mentioned the term differentiated instruction, but rather they used the term varying instruction and customised lessons. Nevertheless, it is apparent that these teachers challenge the minds of their students by finding activities that are appealing to the students and will enhance their ability. It is also evident in the stories shared by the participants that just because a method works with one student, then it is automatically usable with other students. The teachers’ attitude towards helping the high ability students verifies Blaz’s assumption in her book, *Differentiated Instruction – A Guide for World Language Teachers* that for differentiated instruction to work well, teachers must identify the differences among students. Then, teachers make adjustments according to what students will benefit most and best facilitate learning in the classroom (2015:3). Obviously, all of the five participants have identified their high-ability students and from that starting point they prepare lessons, activities, projects that will take the students onto the higher ground of learning. For example, giving advanced books, grammar tests and reading materials, assigning film projects, research work, discovery presentations and giving high-ability students the speaker’s task in an online chat activity are just some of the examples that these teachers have used to motivate their high-ability students in a form of differentiated instruction.

4.5.3 The Zone of Proximal Development

This research has confirmed the theory that students who show high ability in, for example, language need to be challenged more otherwise they will get bored and lose their sense of purpose in the classroom.

Van der Veer claims that high IQ students profit less from school because more able children are not sufficiently challenged by the instruction (2007:79). In contrast to this claim, it seems that the more advanced students of the participants profit also in school because they are being offered different activities for their mental stimulation. The participants reach out to these students before and after the class hours. As mentioned earlier, there are high-ability students who refuse the challenges that their teachers offer them. In this case, it is appropriate to claim that those students who have the motivation to learn profit more in school and those who refuse profit less.
Following Vygotsky, Van der Veer suggests that children should be given tasks that are above their intellectual level, but should not be too far above it (2007:79). As observed, the participants persuade their high-ability students to do advanced tasks in which the students can develop their ability. The tasks given to the high-ability students, are, according to the participants, those interesting to the students.

4.5.4 Shortcomings of the Approach

It is important to note that the interview design was iterative in nature as the guide questions were worded exactly the same to the participants. Follow up questions varied and depended on the participants’ answers to questions. The researcher, however, would like to acknowledge that she might have obtained more in answers if question like “Do you use differentiated instruction?” was replaced with “Tell me more about your typical lesson”. The latter type of question could have given the participants the chance to tell their typical approach and lessons. As a result, it turned out that the researcher made a report of the results of the interview and not the analysis of the participants’ answers. This is the shortcoming that the researcher came to understand while doing this investigation.
5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to investigate how junior high school English teachers work to help and motivate high-ability students develop their potentials in mixed-ability English classes. This aim was perhaps not fully realised due to some shortcomings in the researcher’s interview technique and analysis. Nonetheless, a number of interesting findings emerged that are valuable for informing the practice of English language teaching in mixed-ability classes.

There are three research questions for this paper. Research question 1, “What are the teachers’ opinions about having high-ability students in a mixed-ability class?” has been answered. To sum up, the participants consider having high-ability students as assets rather than liabilities in their mixed ability classrooms since these teachers can use the high-ability students as examples and inspiration to the other students. Additionally, these teachers acknowledged that it is challenging to motivate everyone in a mixed-ability group. It is laborious for the teachers as they have to attend to the differing needs of their students. Notwithstanding that, the participants believe that high-ability students get to socialise, use their creativity, and learn to be tolerant and more understanding when they are together with their classmates.

Research question 2, “What methods and activities do these teachers use to challenge high-ability students in English?” has perhaps somewhat less authentic answers due to the interview approach used by the researcher. However, based on the gathered information, the participants used differentiated instruction to accommodate all the differing needs of all the students in their classrooms.

Research question 3, “What are the difficulties and benefits that these teachers encounter in motivating and challenging high-ability students in English in a mixed-ability class?” has some interesting answers. It came as a surprise that based on the participants’ stories, many high-ability students do not want differentiated instruction. This is considered by the teachers as one of the hindrances to helping students develop their potentials. To sum up, motivating achievers is important, because without proper motivation, the students just do not see the importance of striving hard when they already have a good knowledge of English.

5.1 There is No Magic Solution

Before the investigation started, it was anticipated that the participants would claim that it was not easy to teach in a mixed-ability class. Considering the teachers’ many years of teaching experience, it was presumed that they would have discovered methods and activities that could
make their work easier. Additionally, these teachers acknowledged that it is challenging to motivate everyone in a mixed-ability group. It can be concluded that no matter how long a teacher has been in a teaching position, there are always new challenges and discoveries.

In two cases, informants mentioned that what works with one student may not work with other students. Some activities are appealing to some students but not to others. This creates a dilemma for teachers, but at the same time, it encourages them to think, search or even make their own method that will best suit their students. As mentioned by Anna, one of the participants, it is hard to know what the students need because what they need is “very individual”. It also seems that all five participants are familiar with the Swedish National Agency for Education’s directive that schools should consider students’ different potentials and needs (LGR11:8). Although there are many activities that can boost high-ability students’ learning, there is no such term as best practices. It all depends on the student’s needs and interests. Teachers have to make an extra effort if they aim to help the high-ability students take higher steps.

5.2 The Strengths and Weaknesses of this Paper

The in-depth interviews helped this study achieve its aim. The opinions shared by the participants are valuable and can be used as a point of reference by future researchers. Additionally, new and experienced teachers alike can get ideas from this paper. Policy makers and administrators can also take advantage of this paper. There are ideas and recommendations that need attention, such as the surprising result by which none of the five participants have mentioned about collegial collaboration, consultation, and support in dealing with the dilemma of mixed-ability classroom.

The results from this research cannot be generalized as it has a small sample size. Nevertheless, the purpose of qualitative inquiry is not to generalize but to obtain a better and deep understanding of the phenomenon. However, the findings would have broader transferability if more data sources shared their perspectives. Furthermore, it would have been more enlightening to also know about the students’ perspective as the focus of this paper was on the teachers’ perspective.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

It is highly recommended to do research on this topic using a large sample size, where quantitative methods could be applied. It is always intriguing to know what the majority think.
This research provided insights into the topic, and hopefully developed salient ideas for quantitative research to uncover trends in thought and to go deeper into the problem by using a broader population. Also, when doing research on this topic, it would be interesting to have student voices represented particularly for triangulation of perspectives. It seems interesting to compare teacher and student opinions about the same phenomenon.
6 REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A  

Participant Consent Letter

I, __________________________, participate voluntarily in a research project to be conducted by Analyn Londres (analyn_londresXXXXX), a student from Linnaeus University Växjö, and who will be supervised by Dr. John Airey (john.aireyXXXXX).

I understand that this research is designed to gather information for the thesis of the aforementioned student. I will be one of the teachers who will be interviewed about “mixed ability classes in English”.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not get paid for my participation. I will not be penalized in any form should I decide to withdraw and discontinue my participation.

2. I understand that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview, I have the right to refuse to answer any questions or to end the interview.

3. I understand that the interview length will be between 30-45 minutes or more if I wish and notes will be jotted down during the interview. The researcher will also use a mobile phone or tape recorder for the interview.

4. I understand that the researcher will not divulge my identity and information from this interview and that I will remain anonymous in this entire research study.

5. I understand that my opinions and answers will only be used for the purpose of this research.

6. I understand that I will be interviewed alone and neither my principal nor the school secretary will be present at the interview.

7. I understand that the information I share, using my true identity, is restricted only to the researcher and her supervisor. Should anyone, apart from the researcher and the supervisor wish to use my answers, the researcher will contact me first and get my approval.

8. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signed this __________________________ (day/month/year)
___________________________________________
Signed by (participants name and signature)
Appendix B

Interview Questions

Warm up questions:

Background about survey
(Getting a little information about the respondent)
Age?
What subjects are you teaching?
How long have you been in the teaching profession?
How long have you been at this school?
How long have you been teaching English?

“Proper” questions:

How are English classes organised here? Streaming? Mixed-ability?
What are your experiences in teaching English in a mixed-ability classroom?
Do you use differentiated instructions in a mixed-ability classroom? Tell me more about it?
How would you differentiate gifted high achievers from gifted underachievers?
Do you have high-ability students in your classes?
Can you tell me your experiences of teaching high-ability students?
What is it like to have high-ability students in a mixed ability classroom?
Where do you focus help and attention in a mixed ability class?
How much attention can you give to high-ability students?
What is your opinion about dividing classes according to ability?
What experience do you have of this?