Degree Thesis 1

Level: Bachelor’s
Teaching grammar: A study of the common English grammar errors and grammar teaching methods that can be relevant for Swedish upper secondary schools

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Abstract

Grammar has always been an important part of language learning. Based on various theories, such as the universal grammar theory (Chomsky, 1959) and, the input theory (Krashen, 1970), the explicit and implicit teaching methods have been developed. Research shows that both methods may have some benefits and disadvantages. The attitude towards English grammar teaching methods in schools has also changed and nowadays grammar teaching methods and learning strategies, as a part of language mastery, are one of the discussion topics among linguists.

This study focuses on teacher and learner experiences and beliefs about teaching English grammar and difficulties learners may face. The aim of the study is to conduct a literature review and to find out what scientific knowledge exists concerning the previously named topics. Along with this, the relevant steering documents are investigated focusing on grammar teaching at Swedish upper secondary schools. The universal grammar theory of Chomsky as well as Krashen’s input hypotheses provide the theoretical background for the current study.

The study has been conducted applying qualitative and quantitative methods. The systematic search in four databases LIBRIS, ERIK, LLBA and Google Scholar were used for collecting relevant publications. The result shows that scientists’ publications name different grammar areas that are perceived as problematic for learners all over the world. The most common explanation of these difficulties is the influence of learner L1. Research presents teachers’ and learners’ beliefs to the benefits of grammar teaching methods. An effective combination of teaching methods needs to be done to fit learners’ expectations and individual needs. Together, they will contribute to the achieving of higher language proficiency levels and, therefore, they can be successfully applied at Swedish upper secondary schools.

Keywords: grammar teaching, student errors, teacher beliefs, Swedish language, English language
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1. Introduction

English is a core subject in Swedish schools and is of high priority. Learning English usually begins by the age of nine. However, Swedish teenagers still have some problems using it correctly (Eriksson, 2008, Köhlmyr, 2003). My personal observation during the practice-based education period showed that some of the first year students at upper secondary schools had a lack of knowledge of English grammar. In line with the regulations of the Swedish National Agency of Education, many teachers apply a communicative approach in their English classes focusing more on fluency during communication. As a result, a lack of explicit grammar teaching due to the focus on communicative approach creates difficulties for some students to fulfill written tasks.

At the same time, teachers express their concerns about planning lessons according to the English syllabus and combining the plans with students’ individual needs in grammar. When many students in the classroom need to work with specific grammar areas, it is easier to prepare lesson plans which include different types of grammar practices. However, planning lessons becomes complicated when students have different levels of grammar knowledge and, subsequently, different needs. This difference in students’ grammar needs comes from their individual learning abilities and, in some cases, multilingual backgrounds (Ellis, 2006).

Observations of grammar teaching in Swedish upper secondary schools, during teacher training practice, led to the decision to conduct a study where grammar difficulties and attitudes towards grammar teaching and learning would be the focus. The present thesis work is a literature review about grammar teaching and learning.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this essay is to conduct a literature review in order to find out what is known about grammar learning and teaching for upper secondary school students. The more specific aim of this work is to identify the grammar areas that are perceived as difficult by students of English in general and that occur in students’ oral and written production.
and to discover teachers’ and students’ beliefs about grammar teaching. The research aims to find answers to these questions:

1. What are the areas of English grammar which teachers and students identify as being difficult?
2. What do researchers say about the methods of teaching grammar?
3. What beliefs do teachers and learners have about grammar teaching?

2. Background

In this section relevant language learning theories are presented. Some of them are a starting point for various teaching approaches and the explanation of learning difficulties concerning grammar. The review of steering documents for upper secondary schools in Sweden is presented. This is followed by a brief introduction of grammar teaching methods, and common grammar errors that are presented in literature are described.

2.1 Theoretical points of view

The theory of universal grammar (UG), presented by Chomsky (1959, cited in Lundahl, 2012), is an attempt to explain the child’s ability to learn and develop language skills. This innate ability is caused by the existence of the language acquisition device that controls the developmental process and helps children to pick up the language from surroundings and use it according to their age level. It means that at very early age, children are exposed to rather varied language input, from simple words and sounds to complex sentences. However, their own language tends to be simple single sounds. With time, children develop good pronunciation and proper grammar use despite the inadequate and incomplete input (Lundahl, 2012). Hence, we depend on the innate mechanisms when we learn languages.

The input theory, developed by Krashen in 1970, focuses on language input. According to his theory we develop our language skills in regards to comprehensible input. Krashen states: “If input is understood, and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided. The language teacher need not attempt to deliberately
teach the next structure along the natural order – it will be provided in just the right quantities and automatically reviewed if the student receives a sufficient amount of comprehensible input” (1985, p.2) The input theory separates acquisition and learning. Krashen emphasizes the differences between these two processes and states that comprehensible input has prior importance for successful learning. The idea about comprehensible input became a ground for the development of the communicative approach, which has been taken by The Council of Europe as basis for developing first international language learning syllabus for adults. Primarily described by Wilkins in 1976, this approach is nowadays applied for teaching language in all European countries (Schulz, 1984, European Council, 2009).

The language input per se does not result in learning (Peaget, 1936). Other cognitive processes are involved as well. This theory was developed by Piaget (1936, cited in Lundahl, 2012) and presented as a cognitive theory. Piaget states that comprehensible input provides the learner with information that needs further processing. Together with the learner’s cognitive contribution it leads to the knowledge that can be proved by learners output.

To summarize, people learn language gradually. Thanks to the language acquisition device, they absorb comprehensible information from surroundings. This information needs further processing where cognitive abilities need to be actively involved. This process is strongly individual, that is why it can vary in time from person to person.

2.2 Problem areas of English grammar

Grammar is a part of language that many may find difficult to master. Many books on different languages help both teachers and learners to recognize grammar errors, to understand linguistic factors that cause difficulties and to find relevant strategies for working with grammar. These books are based on previous studies, observations, interviews with teachers of English or authors’ own experiences.

According to Harmer (1995) there are some problems that are typical in English grammar for learners regardless to their mother tongue. One category of them is
connected with the mismatch between form and function in English. In many situations the present continuous tense is used to describe actions in the future: *I am eating lunch with him tomorrow.*

Another problem is English nouns (Harmer, 1995). One group of nouns do not change their forms when they are plural: *furniture.* Other types change just a sound inside: *teeth, women.* The use of prepositions *since* and *for* to indicate time causes errors as well (Harmer, 1995): *I am living here since 1998. I have been living here for two years.* Harmer points to the fact that speakers of other languages tend to compare the grammar of their mother tongue with English grammar. As a result the similarities in grammar make learning process easier and the differences lead to a variety of problem areas. This fact is well known among teachers who find it demanding to prepare plans for English classes for multilingual groups of students (Harmer, 1995).

Ellis (2006) does not define any specific area of grammar that can be perceived as difficult. He believes that these areas can be defined by teachers who are aware of learners’ weaknesses. Teachers themselves must base the selection of grammar areas to teach “on the well-known errors produced by learners” (2006, p.89). Teaching content can be varied because it depends on learners’ language backgrounds. This statement is important because learners in Swedish upper secondary schools can have another mother tongue than Swedish. Moreover, some of them can be bilingual. Bering in mind the variety of the linguistic backgrounds, teaching forms that differ from the learners’ first language and teaching marked rather than unmarked forms are beneficial (Ellis, 2006).

### 2.3 Grammar teaching

Covert and overt concepts of grammar teaching are taken as a basis for teaching methods. “Covert grammar teaching is where grammatical acts are hidden from the students - even though they are learning the language” (Harmer, 1995, p.3). During activities such as reading texts and doing gap filling exercises, students focus mainly on the activities per se whilst grammar is learnt subconsciously. Overt grammar teaching is a conscious way of learning where the teacher gives explanations of grammatical rules. With overt grammar teaching, the teacher makes students aware of grammar rules whilst with covert
grammar teaching there is only a hope that students would absorb the grammar information and acquire it (Harmer, 1995). For the present literature review, it is important to reveal what pros and cons of using one or the other method are and what beliefs exist about these methods.

In recent years the communicative approach has been popular among many teachers and been named as the most effective one (Harmer, 2003). Applying this approach, the focus is on the language function and communicative activities. The grammar is, therefore, taught implicitly. Though the learners develop more communicative skills, according to Harmer, it does not lead to the effective usage of language, namely, language accuracy. The necessity of both, communicative skills and good knowledge of grammar is obvious (Harmer, 1995). This point of view is widespread and many English courses are organized so that students have possibility to learn language functions explicitly and to combine their grammar knowledge with practical communicative activities. Examples of such activities are discussions, games, project work and role playing.

Analyzing different approaches and problems related to each approach, Ellis (2006) states that teaching grammar is undoubtedly necessary for mastering the language, for achieving accuracy and fluency. However, this statement is controversial and open for challenge (Ellis, 2006). Three basic ways of teaching grammar are presented and summarized by Ellis: first, by the presentation and practice of grammatical items; second, by discovering grammatical rules by learners; and third, by exposing learners to contrived input providing a great number of the examples of one specific grammar rule. Many important factors must be taken to account, such as the fact that learning processes according to the natural order, from single words to complex structures, and the fact that comprehensible input does not guarantee the acquisition of language (Ellis, 2006).

2.4 Steering documents

The study of Swedish steering documents for English-language education, national curriculum and syllabuses for English 5 and English 6 courses for upper secondary school show that the objective of learning English is to develop students’ ability to use
language freely in various situations. The development of communicative skills is in focus. Students must be able to express their opinions in such areas as their future profession, culture, tradition, society rules and life conditions in various countries, and so on. Students must be given the opportunity for developing good understanding of both written texts and spoken language and for giving response in English in written or spoken form according to situation and receiver (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b).

Another point that steering documents focus on is the development of knowledge about the culture, the society and life conditions in English-speaking countries all over the world. Students must be given the opportunity to work with various resources and absorb the information they need (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b). Such work may provide them with the great amount of input in English. At the same time such work may require rather sufficient vocabulary and good grammar knowledge.

Finally, the last point that is most valuable for the present study is that in steering documents, English is named as the language of teaching (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b). It means that students do not focus anymore on different components of English, such as pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar, but they use language as a tool for the intake of information and for their own production. On the one hand it means that teachers must provide a good English-speaking environment where students get a lot of “input”. On the other hand it can be perceived as difficult by learners with insufficient communicative skills. It may also be hard for some teachers to run classes in English because of a lack of confidence in teaching grammar and working with language accuracy.

The freedom for shaping working plans is given to teachers. It means that they must focus on developing students’ communicative skills and include in working plans such activities that improve learners’ perceptions, productions and interactions. They must evaluate students’ knowledge according to the grading criteria which are also related to perception, production and interaction. In addition, students need to learn and use specific strategies when reading and listening for the achieving of good proficiency in production and interaction. A high proficiency level may benefit from practicing and repeating grammar, though it is not mentioned in steering documents. Furthermore, to get a passing grade for English course, learners need to demonstrate knowledge of culture
and life-style in English speaking countries. They are also expected to have a rather high proficiency in English, which is presented in the syllabus as a tool for receiving information and developing communicative skills.

3. Methodology

In this section the choice of method for the current thesis work is presented. There is also a description of selection criteria and selection process.

3.1 Method and material.

The present work is a literature study with the aim to find out what research says about grammar teaching in various publications. The material for this study was retrieved from four databases. Thereafter, the collected data was used to answer the study questions. The number of keywords used for the search was constant for each database. As quantitative method results in countable data, it is presented in a table.

In order to collect information that would answer the study questions, a qualitative method was applied. The abstracts of publications were read and added to the list of the most relevant according to the research focus of the present study. Thereafter, the selected publications were critically read and analyzed according to themes. A brief summary of chosen publications is presented according to the search order. Out of the collected data the study questions were answered.

The material for the study was scientific publications, such as doctoral thesis, articles about empirical studies that contain information, which is useful for the present study. This thesis work does not include any results of university students’ studies. Material for this study was chosen according to the selection criteria described in Section 3.2.

3.2 Selection criteria

To narrow down the search process the following criteria have been used:

- The databases used for the research are LIBRIS, ERIC, LLBA, and Google Scholar.
• Keywords for the search are “teaching grammar”, “teaching grammar difficulties”, “grammar learning difficulties” and “Swedish student grammar”.

• The scientific works should be published in 2005 or later.

• The language of the publication is English.

• The publications must be peer reviewed.

• The research must be based on the data from the field observation or interview with either students or teachers.

• The participants of the studies must be of the proper age and education level, e.g. the age of the participants must be equivalent to the age of upper secondary schools’ students in Sweden and the teachers’ experiences must be equivalent to those of teachers’ at upper secondary schools in Sweden.

• The research should provide data which can have relevance for the current thesis work: it must contain data that helps to answer study questions.

3.3 Analyses of publications

The analysis of the chosen publications was based on themes. It means that all publications were read and their content was studied in terms of information that is related to study questions of the present thesis work and that would answer them.

4. Results

In this section the results of the selection and critical reading are presented. The results of the critical reading and the analyses of the chosen publications are organized and presented according to the study questions of the present work.

4.1 Selection results

The first selection of publications was done according to their titles. The most relevant works were chosen. The second selection was based on the relevance of the abstracts’ content. Thereafter, the decision about close studying of the publication and presentation of the most valuable information from it was made. As the present thesis work includes a
number of questions to answer, nine articles were chosen. The databases, keywords combinations, the results of the search and the number of the selected publications are gathered and presented in Table 1. When the number of hits was high the additional criterion was applied. As all selecting criteria were similar for every search they are not described in Table 1. Instead only the additional criterion was presented where it was required to narrow down the search. All information is placed according to the search process order. The search combination that did not lead to any relevant publication was not included in Table 1.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Database</th>
<th>keyword</th>
<th>Additional criteria</th>
<th>Number of hits</th>
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<th>Read articles</th>
<th>Relevant articles</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
<td>Swedish student grammar errors</td>
<td></td>
<td>3420</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first database that was used for the search is LLBA (Linguistic and Language Behavior Abstracts). The keywords “teaching grammar” gave 741 hits. The number of read abstracts was 57. The number of the read articles was 3 and one of them was chosen as the most relevant for the present thesis work. The title of the article is
“Effective grammar teaching lessons from confident grammar teachers”. This article is written by E. Petraki and D. Hill in 2011.

The keyword combination “grammar learning difficulties” gave 247 hits. The number of read abstracts was 13 and three articles were studied. Two of them have been chosen for the present thesis work. The first article “Exploring tension between teachers’ grammar teaching beliefs and practices”, written in 2009 by S. Phipps and S. Borg.

The second article “Advanced EFL learners’ beliefs about language learning and teaching: a comparison between grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary” is written by E. Simon and M. Taverniers in 2011.

The last keyword “swedish student grammar” gave 9 hits. One abstract has been read. As it contained some relevant data it was chosen for the further presentation in the present work. The article “Swedishness” as a norm for learners of English in Swedish schools: A study of national and local Objectives and Criteria in compulsory schools” is written by J. Tholin and was published in 2015.

LIBRIS was the next database chosen for the search. The keyword combination “Swedish student grammar” gave three hits. The article “To err is human” written by Pia Köhlmyr in 2001 has been chosen for critical reading. Though this article did not fit the selected criteria it was included to the list of the most relevant publication, because it concludes the information that has relevance to one of the study questions.

The database ERIC was used for the search applying similar keyword combinations and selection criteria. The additional criteria “full text” has been chosen. The combination of keywords “learning grammar difficulties” gave six hits. One of abstracts has been read and as it contained the relevant information it has been included in the current study. The article “Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience” is written by E. Sawir and published in 2005.

The database Google Scholar has also been used for the research and the combination of keywords “teaching grammar” gave 104000 hits. Two articles were chosen for the future critical reading: “Investigating controversies in teaching Grammar: A case for Iranian high school students” written by A. B. Boroujeni in 2012 and “the
communicative approaches revisited and the relevance of teaching grammar”, written by S. Ahmed and A. Alamin in 2011.

The use of combination “learning difficulties” gave 46900 hits even after applying the additional criteria “year of publication 2011-2015”. Skimming the abstracts for the combination “learning difficulties” that had connection only with linguistics, one article was chosen as relevant to the present thesis work: “Language learning difficulties among Malaysian gifted students”, written by M. M. Yunus, A. Sulaiman, M. H. Kamalrluzaman and N. M. Ishak in 2013.

Applying the combination “grammar errors” with the additional criteria “year of publication 2011-2015” gave 17800 hits. Skimming abstracts led to the article “An investigation of grammar problems facing English language learners” that was included in the list for deeper studying. The article is written by E. Elturki in 2014.

The last combination “swedish student” gave 3420 hits. One of the 25 abstracts contained valuable information for the study. The doctoral thesis work “Tense and aspect in advanced Swedish learners’ written English” is written by A. Eriksson and published in 2008.

4.2 Summary of the articles

The nine scientific works were chosen for the close reading. After the review, a brief summary of each publication is presented separately.

The first article “Effective grammar teaching: Lessons from confident grammar teachers” by E.Petraki and D.Hill, published in 2011, has the objective to investigate teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about grammar teaching in ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts. Data was collected from seventy-two participants employing questionnaires and interviews. Almost all participants agreed on the significance of grammar knowledge. Many of them pointed on the connection between grammar teaching in classrooms with own experience and an interest in grammar. Those who were interested in grammar or had studied English applying grammar-translation methods had a tendency to include grammar exercises in their lesson plans more often. Knowledge of other languages is named by participants as beneficial. When teachers possess knowledge of other foreign languages it helps to apply contrastive
methods in the classroom and helps to explain to learners with other linguistic backgrounds the principles of English grammar rules. Despite the understanding of the importance of grammar teaching, not all participants define themselves as effective grammar teachers. Their explanations to this phenomenon are a lack of grammar terminology knowledge, a lack of confidence and knowledge of various teaching methods.

The second article “Exploring tensions between teachers’ grammar teaching beliefs and practices”, written by Phipps and Borg (2009) presents observations and interviews with three practicing teachers of English in Turkey. The results demonstrate some differences between teachers’ beliefs and their practical work. Teachers attribute this to their own freedom for interpreting and understanding the teaching context, including the steering documents and by the influence the students have on the teachers. When teaching methods do not match students’ expectations and beliefs in language learning they will not succeed and the behavior issues, caused by students’ lost motivation, create problems.

The article “Advanced EFL learners’ beliefs about language learning and teaching: a comparison between grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary” presents the study conducted with the questionnaire method where the first-year students of English at a Belgian university express their beliefs about mastering grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (Simon & Taverniers, 2015). The outcomes of the study show that grammar is the most important part for students who aim to attend a native-like proficiency. However, there are also opinions that vocabulary must be more prioritized for successful communication. As a communicative approach focuses on fluency more than accuracy, many students believe that a lack of vocabulary leads to the communicative breakdowns more often than using wrong grammatical forms.

Thelon’s article “”Swedishness” as a norm for learners of English in Swedish schools: a study of national and local objectives and criteria in compulsory schools” examines whether the Swedish steering documents for English-language education in compulsory schools are based on the assumption that all learners are of Swedish origin and have equal knowledge of Swedish. The author points out the multicultural background of Swedish students and various levels of proficiency in
Swedish. The steering documents and teaching methods that are used at schools expect students to have adequate knowledge of Swedish. When working with grammar and translation in Swedish schools, the contrastive methods are often employed. The author believes that the grammar teaching would be more effective if teachers had some knowledge of basic grammar rules of other languages.

Köhlmyr’s work “To err is human…” presents analysis of written productions of 383 randomly selected participants. The results of the analysis demonstrate that most errors relate to verbs, nouns and articles. Köhlmyr suggests that about 40% of errors are the result of transfer and 50% of errors are explained as overgeneralization of L2 rules. The most common error is a use of incorrect tense and “third person –s”. Swedish students and teachers are aware of the importance of language knowledge. In English classes where the communicative approach is applied, students focus on developing oral communicative skills. As a result there is a discrepancy between actual and perceived language proficiency. Bearing in mind Köhlmyr’s explanation of errors, it is possible to suggest that the multilingual background of many Swedish students has not been taken into account.

Sawir’s article “Language difficulties of international students in Australia: the effects of prior learning experience” presents university students opinion about learning grammar. Twelve participants were of Asian origin and were undertaking a bridging program to improve their English for further study at Australian universities. They all had their prior learning experiences from teacher-centered classrooms with focus on grammar and reading. Learning English was seen as learning scholarly skills for the purpose of reading and writing, not as learning living-language use (Sawir, 2005). Despite their beliefs in the grammar teaching method they still found it a difficult aspect of English to learn. Furthermore, students also struggle with their understanding of oral language (teachers’ spoken English). Participation in oral communications is slowed down because of a lack of fluency and a strong focus on grammar. During the interviews, students point on a lack of classrooms practices on developing oral skills and listening comprehension. Instead the huge amount of grammar exercises and reading texts have been directed to work with as everyday classrooms activities.
In the article “Language learning difficulties among Malaysian gifted students” (Yunus, et al., 2013) the results of interviews with six students on the subject of language learning difficulties are presented. Students are faced with difficulties when speaking in English. They explained it by insufficient knowledge of grammar and a lack of vocabulary. Some of the common errors are the wrong application of verb tense, inappropriate word choice and prepositions. Students see their weaknesses as the result of poor teaching methods, a lack of opportunities to use English outside the school and negative attitudes towards English.

In the article “Investigating controversies in teaching grammar: A case of Iranian students” (Boroujeni, 2012) a study based on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires are presented. The participants, 128 students and five EFL instructors in four high schools in Isfahan, Iran, give the preference to “focus on form” instructional method when teaching grammar. The explicit grammar teaching is favored.

The relevance of old methods to new teaching methods is described in Ahmed’s and Alamin’s article “The communicative approaches revisited and the relevance of teaching grammar”. Considering the principles of various syllabuses and investigating scientific literature, it becomes obvious that a balance should be found between communicative and structural methods. The comprehensive methods of teaching foreign languages include the use of IPads and computers. The author’s opinion is that the communicative approach dominates nowadays. However, the grammatical correctness cannot be neglected. Classrooms teachers are the ones who know better students’ needs and, therefore, they can make a decision about the best way of teaching those students. Bearing this in mind, the old teaching ways such as drilling and grammar rule explanations, can be successfully applied in the classroom.

Elturki (2014) presents the grammar areas that are named as difficult among 61 EFL students in the West Coast of the United States in “An investigation of grammar problems facing English language learners”. The participants of the study are 18 years old, and they have various cultural and linguistic backgrounds and have already achieved good knowledge of English but still need to challenge language more thoroughly. A study was conducted employing a questionnaire where participants indicated the most challenging grammar areas by rating them on a 1 to 5 Likert-Scale (1 indicates “Very
easy” and 5 “Very difficult”). Many students name such areas of grammar as present/future/past unreal conditions as difficult. For effective learning the author suggests the combination of explicit grammar teaching with communicative based task activities to practice the grammar rules.

Finally, such areas of English grammar as tense and aspect are investigated in the Eriksson’s (2008) work “Tense and Aspect in advanced Swedish learners’ written English”. This study is based on the investigation of English written productions of advanced learners in Sweden. The participants of the study are Swedish students at the department of English, studying at university level (third or fourth term). Their written productions, 44 essays, have been taken from the Swedish component of the International Corpus of Learner English (SWICLE). Applying a comparative perspective, it was noticed that tense and aspect seem to cause difficulties as usage of tense and aspect differs from that of native speakers. Swedish learners had tendencies for frequent use of the past tense as their texts had more narrative style. Some works demonstrated overuse of imperatives and progressive forms as they had more spoken-like tone. Furthermore, in argumentative texts the native speakers shift more between past and present tenses whilst Swedish learners shifted more between future and present perfect categories. There were some samples of misuse the present perfect, the future tense, the use of conditionals and progressive. As the samples were small it was difficult to give clear explanations. However, the misuse of verb tense occurred mainly in areas where Swedish and English differed. The investigation points to the need of context-based grammar teaching where students are given opportunity to see how a specific grammar structure is used and how it works.

5. Results of the analysis

In this section the analyses of the articles are presented. The answers of the study questions are given out of the data collected from all chosen publications.
5.1 Areas of English grammar that teachers and students name as creating difficulties

Not long ago the focus of language learning was on written communication and the grammar-translation teaching approach or focus on form was widely applied (Ellis, 2006). In most Asian countries this approach still dominates. Because of insufficient language input students do not develop oral communicative skills and their written work is hard to assess due to poor grammar (Sawir, 2005). Despite the great amount of grammar lessons at schools and a big number of grammar exercises, they acquire a passive knowledge of grammar that is hard to apply in their own spoken and written productions. It can be interpreted that students face difficulty in applying grammatical rules in discourse manner (Yunus, et al. 2013, Sawir, 2005). Many students emphasize that they are reluctant to speak English because the constant thinking of grammar and the fear of grammatical errors prevent them from participation in oral communications.

Differences between the grammatical structures of English and that of the students’ own language create difficulties during learning (Sawir, 2005). Interference from the mother tongue grammar system is named as a factor that contributes to the wrong use of English grammar rules (Yunus, et al. 2013, Köhlmyr, 2003). Some learners have benefits as their mother tongue grammar rules resemble those of target language. However, it can also lead to the situation when student rely on this similarity and due to transfer make grammar errors.

The present literature research obtained also information that some learners get confused when practicing such grammar rule as “third person-s” (Köhlmyr, 2014). The opposite effect is observed: students overgeneralize this rule because in their mind it differs from their mother tongue grammar and is typical for English.

Application of verb tense, prepositions and inappropriate word choice are the areas where English learners have difficulties despite the teaching approach that focuses on grammar (Yunus, et al. 2013, Elturki, 2014, Eriksson, 2008). The mismatch between form and function is well-known grammar area that learners of English have difficulties with (Yunus, et al. 2013, Elturki, 2014, Eriksson, 2008, Sawir, 2005). The variety in forms and usages makes students confused despite learning and practicing grammar rules every day (Elturki, 2014). The misuse of progressive category is noticed
as problematic for Swedish learners of English (Eriksson, 2008) and explained as the area where Swedish and English differ (Eriksson, 2008). English conditionals are considered as difficult because they have different forms and can express both real and unreal conditions (Elturki, 2014).

To summarize, various grammar rules cause confusion and many learners perceive difficulties when using them. There are grammar areas that are perceived as difficult by learners of some languages whilst other learners benefit from their first language. A possible explanation to it is the similarity or difference of learners’ mother tongue. It means that learners of English all over the world do have needs in teaching grammar. However, their needs in teaching some specific grammar areas may vary.

5.2 Ways of teaching grammar

Learning grammar has been considered from different scientific points of view. Many theories have been developed to find the most reasonable explanation to how the grammar learning process looks (Chomsky, 1959, Krashen 1970, Piaget 1936). These theories gave basis to various teaching approaches that have been applied in English classes all over the world. The traditional explicit grammar teaching method is still widely applied in many Asian countries. However, it is not admitted as the most effective one since learners, as it was mentioned above, still have issues with grammar. As their knowledge is not applicable in practice and language input is highly limited they struggle with accuracy in both written and oral productions (Sawir, 2005, Yunus, et al.2013). The communicative approach is considered as the opposite to traditional grammar teaching and it has been implemented in many European countries. Applying the communicative approach gives good results, however, as the present study shows, students do have grammar issues as well. Moreover, some of them strongly believe that their grammar knowledge is much better that it actually is (Köhlmyr, 2003). Furthermore, the contrastive method has been named as the one that helps students to concentrate on differences between English grammar and the grammar of their mother tongue (Köhlmyr, 2003, Eriksson, 2008). Though, the applying of the contrastive method may be difficult in diverse students groups in Sweden where many students have different mother tongue.
Learning language with strong emphasis on developing communicative skills fluency gets priority, whilst grammar practices are given less emphasis (Petrarki, 2011). It has been noticed that, having such classes, students develop some routines, such as having discussions and debates. Teachers’ attempts to change classrooms activities sometimes lead to students’ unwillingness to participate and even discipline issues (Petraki, 2011, Phipps & Borg, 2009). The authors suggest some influence on the teacher’s choice of grammar teaching activities by students. The choice of teaching grammar can also be affected by teachers’ professional levels, professional confidence and their personal beliefs on grammar teaching (Phipps & Borg, 2009).

As learning goes gradually, accordingly with the natural order, from easy structures to more complex ones (Ellis, 2006), all students need to be given opportunities for comprehensible input and time for acquiring grammar aspects. It becomes clear from the chosen publications that many researchers argue for a balance between various teaching methods: the traditional explicit grammar teaching method does not provide learners with opportunities to prove their knowledge in real life situations and the communicative approach does not leave much space for focusing on accuracy. The balance between various methods must be found by teachers who know the students’ needs better (Ahmed, Alamin, 2012, Sawir, 2005, Elturki, 2014, Yunus, et al, 2013).

5.3 Teachers’ and students’ beliefs reflected in the research on the subject of grammar teaching

Grammar is one of the language aspects that need to be mastered for the effective usage of foreign language (Ellis, 1997). From the review of publications one can see an understanding of grammar importance from both learners’ and teachers’ perspectives. Teachers agree about the importance of grammar teaching and integrating it into classroom practices. However, there are also contrastive views and beliefs on grammar teaching. Some teachers believe that grammar needs to be taught explicitly (Petrarki, 2011, Phipps and Borg, 2009, Boroujeni, 2012). Other teachers believe that grammar can be discovered by students themselves if they are provided by sufficient language input (Phipps and Borg, 2009). As it was revealed, teachers’ beliefs are strongly connected
with their previous personal experiences in learning and education. Whilst earlier teaching methods relied on grammar and translation, the latest methods, the communicative language approach and task based approach, toned down the grammar teaching need, which divided researchers and teachers and predisposed the design of teacher education programs (Petrarki, 2011).

Teaching grammar may have connection with learners’ beliefs and teachers’ personal experiences. Successful learning of second language for some learners may be connected with some specific teaching methods. It was noted that some learners strongly believe in a grammar translation method though they perceive a lack of communicative activities and practices (Sawir, 2005, Boroujeni, 2012, Yunus et al. 2013). On the contrary, other learners believe that a wide vocabulary is significantly more important for communication. This confidence comes from the strategies learners use: they look for the meaning of unknown words more often than think of using some grammatical structures. Furthermore, a wrong used grammar form during conversations does not lead to the breakdown whilst missing words creates communication breakdowns (Simon & Taverniers, 2011).

6. Discussion

In this section the main results of study are summarized and answers of study questions are discussed.

Analysis of steering documents for upper secondary schools in Sweden led to the conclusion that the national syllabus is designed under the strong influence of the communicative approach which is based, in its turn, on Krashen’s Input theory. Development of learners’ communicative skills is in focus in syllabuses for the first two English courses at upper secondary school in Sweden and English is considered to be a language for classroom activities and learning. From the investigation of the national syllabus for upper secondary schools in Sweden one may assume that students of secondary schools in Sweden have to achieve a rather high level of grammar awareness and a well-developed vocabulary for further studying at upper secondary schools and to
master the course programs. There is no clear statement about teaching grammar at upper secondary school level in the national syllabus. However, they contain objectives to develop students’ language proficiency which does have connection with both fluency and accuracy. The research, however, shows that written and oral productions of Swedish learners at the age of 16 have a great number of grammar errors (Köhlmyr, 2003, Eriksson, 2008). Thereafter, research reveals that despite the explicit teaching of grammar, as language component at the secondary schools, it still needs to be repeated and practiced by students at upper secondary schools and even universities (Sawir, 2005, Boroujeni, 2012, Yunus et al. 2013).

Whilst teaching grammar Swedish teachers of English tend to apply the contrastive perspective, which causes difficulties for students with other mother tongues other than Swedish (Tholin, 2015). Due to the variety of the linguistic backgrounds and an unequal level of Swedish, learning grammar for some students can be a rather complicated process. Moreover, the research shows that students with different L1 may have different needs in teaching various grammar areas. Hence, the multilingual structure of learning groups in Swedish secondary schools seems not to be taken into account (Tholin, 2015).

The research shows that multilingual students, who study English at Swedish upper secondary schools, might have difficulties with studying courses in classes where the communicative approach applies. However, the study of steering documents for upper secondary schools English courses shows that this fact was omitted. Learners who came to Sweden from other countries where there is a lack of possibilities for practicing communicative skills and listening comprehension, might face difficulties with processing course program. As learners have poor oral skills and listening comprehension the constant input in English may be hard to intake and absorb all necessary information. Eventually, it may lead to the situation when students do not improve their writing and oral skills because of the fixation on the content, or they may not remember the content because they concentrate on accuracy.

Furthermore, the steering documents do not contain any directives to further development of grammar skills for better mastering English. Meanwhile, the research shows the necessity of further grammar teaching at upper secondary schools as the period
of time for processing grammar is very individual and it depends on comprehensible input and learners’ individual cognitive abilities (Krashen, 1970).

The present study revealed one more fact: learners all over the world prefer different methods of grammar teaching. Their preferences are based on previous experiences. It means that the choice of grammar teaching methods needs to fit students’ expectations, as their beliefs and already proved strategies affect their learning process (Sawir, 2005). One can assume, for example, that students who have studied grammar explicitly in their homelands may perceive difficulties when studying grammar implicitly within a communicative approach.

7. Conclusion

In this section some conclusions about the method and its limitations are presented. This section includes the implications of the present thesis work and recommendations for further research.

The quantitative and qualitative methods were chosen for the present literature study. Applying the quantitative method, one gets a result that is usually presented in numbers. Literature study is a systematic search for information that needs to fulfill some requirements. With this purpose the selective criteria were developed and applied. However, due to the choice of the selected criteria some valuable information could be missed.

The number of databases was narrowed down to four which made the search process easy. On the other hand, other databases can hold relevant information that has not been found. To add, during the search only publications with full text available online was chosen for further critical reading and analysis.

The search was limited by the period of ten years for all databases. However, some keywords gave a great number of hits so that it was necessary to apply additional criteria to make the search workable. This measure resulted in a lower number of publications which, at the same time, could exclude the publications with relevant information.
The choice of keywords made the study limited as well in a way that not all possible word combinations were included and tested.

One of the search criteria was “language”, as it was assumed that most research about teaching English grammar can be written in English. This assumption, however, could also limit the search and could also be a cause of rather little number of studies, made in Sweden.

The present literature study aimed to find out what is known about grammar errors that occur in learners’ written and oral productions. It was also essential to know what learners and teachers think about the necessity of grammar teaching and what methods are, therefore, the most preferable. The assumption was made that most errors have connection with learners’ mother tongue and, hence, can vary (Ellis, 2006, Harmer, 1995). It means that the teachers of English at Swedish upper secondary schools must take into account the multilingual diversity of students’ groups when planning work with grammar.

The study reveals that teaching grammar is necessary even for university level students all over the world as they do have needs in grammar practicing. The learners at Swedish upper secondary schools are not an exception as their productions comprise grammar errors as well. Moreover, the national syllabus state objectives for students to achieve a good level of language proficiency. With considerations to this fact, teachers of English in Sweden are faced with a task to shape working plans that would meet both students’ needs and requirements of steering documents. It is not, however, an easy task. Firstly, the steering documents do not give any instructions or directions to teachers about teaching grammar in classrooms which means that teachers are left without any official guidance. Secondly, learning groups at Swedish upper secondary schools include students with various linguistic backgrounds and learning experiences. In addition, the study shows that students and teachers beliefs in teaching grammar strongly affect students’ learning process.

General conclusion is hard to make because the chosen method has many limitations and further investigation of scientific publications in this area needs to be done. Although the method has weaknesses, the outcomes of the present study can serve as valuable information, such as the information about students’ various needs in
grammar practicing, students’ L1 and its influence on grammar learning process, beliefs in teaching strategies and methods and multicultural linguistic background of teaching groups and, in this sense it can be applied by Swedish teachers of English at upper secondary schools.

As students groups at Swedish upper secondary schools include learners with different mother tongue it can be of great interest to make further research on difficulties that these learners face when learning grammar in English classes in Sweden.
References


