

"Teaching English in Sweden"

Seen from one teacher's perspective.



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Another long summer vacation is over and a new school year has just started at Ållebergsgymnasiet in Falköping. It's August 23 and during the past week I have met all my students, some for the first time, while others are well-known since we got to know each other last year. I'm a teacher of English and Swedish at the upper secondary school and will now tell you a little bit of the way I and my colleagues teach English. But first a background.

Ållebergsgymnasiet, an upper secondary school, is located in Falköping, an agricultural community in the south-western part of Sweden between the two large lakes, Vänern and Vättern. The school provides three year programmes for both vocational and general studies. Students may choose among many national programmes. There is also a special sports programme, The Volleyball Programme, in which students from all over Sweden are recruited, as well as a Bilingual Programme. The students begin at the age of 16.

All national programmes comprise eight core subjects, one of them is English. This means that everyone takes the A-course, which comprises 100 school points corresponding to 100 hours' education. For students at The Natural and Social Sciences programmes another 100 points, the B-course, is compulsory. There is also a C-course available as an individual option.

There is a syllabus for each course and assessment criteria for the various grades, Pass, Pass with Distinction and Pass with Special Distinction. The new curriculum came into force in 1994. There are also local syllabuses and criteria built on the national ones. To maintain an equal level, both English A and B are followed by National Tests given at the same dates in the beginning of May all over Sweden. Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking are tested.

At Ållebergsgymnasiet the 100 hours are spread out over the first year, which means that the students have three 50-minute lessons a week, but of course the exact length of the lessons may

vary because of "problems with the timetable". Vocational classes have a slower rate of studying, so for them the A-course is extended over two years.

Among the goals which the tuition should fulfil and students attain are:

Understanding spoken as well as written English, being able to take part in conversation and informing, writing, and knowing about the social system, culture and manner of living in areas where English is spoken. The students should be able to make use of their knowledge in ordinary life, in working life and for further studies.

Now back to "reality and every day teaching work" at my school. Last week, in one of the first lessons, every new student took a diagnostic test and after that some of the weakest students were placed in special resource groups. This means that when I meet my new class again - a Business and Administration class - there will be "only" 27 students instead of 32. The work will start in a textbook, which is not for free as it was some years ago, when the economy of the municipality was better. I use this book almost every week and give the students homework consisting of e.g. studying a text and learning vocabulary. Mostly I test the words orally, but now and then I let them do a written test. The different texts in our textbooks are available on a pre-recorded cassette, which I always run. The only thing that is not lent to the pupils is a booklet, a work book, "Grammar Check", on three levels.

Moreover we are quite well-equipped concerning novels and short stories, both Easy Readers and original ones. We don't have a fixed number that the students have to read, but we try to encourage them to borrow as many as possible to increase their vocabulary. An assignment could be a summary, a book review, retelling or discussing the book in groups or in class. Texts can also be newspaper articles. In that case it's possible to connect to the Programme Objectives.

Some of the newer textbooks also have special Programme Pages with vocabulary useful for e.g. The Hotel, Restaurant and Catering Programme, which is another of my groups. Dictionaries are often needed when studying more difficult texts and I try to make the students learn how to look up words on their own as much as possible, even if it's quicker to ask me.

When it comes to speaking we try to practice that point as much as possible. Most students think this is the most important part of the education. Yes, it is important, but I try to convince them that without knowing the suitable words, it's hard to speak. And grammar matters, even if it's not always fun to learn. Brief speeches or talking in class or in small groups, role play and maybe even theatre could be usable. When studying Shakespeare, which is in the B-course, it is often a pleasure to act it all out, especially in classes where there is an interest in theatre.

Film seems to be an appreciated feature in all teaching even if today's young people have already learnt a lot of English by watching TV and videos on their own. We also have special school radio programs that often deal with current and interesting topics.

The Internet is of course a boundless source for both teachers and students. When working with different kinds of projects, e.g. realia, it's of great help.

Whenever we get a chance we invite native speakers of English to our classes. There have been touring drama groups, Irish students, natural science teachers among others.

Hopefully the students make their knowledge deeper when taking the B-course, at least that is what is expected of them. The items are about the same as in the A-course, but the B-course also comprises studying History and Literature from a historical point of view. It's possible for all student to have the B-course, for the vocational programmes as an individual option.

If possible I try to co-operate not only with other English teachers but also with teachers in civics if I have a Social Science class etc. The teachers are supposed to work in special teams (Sw."arbetslag"). I belong to The Business and Administration team where the teachers are very interested in co-operating with as many teachers in core subjects as possible. Usually it's not difficult to find common areas. English could be used in many parts of the programme specific subjects and courses like Tourism and Cultural differences experienced when meeting a new business partner. I think it's good for many reasons, as a change of the "normal" rhythm in the classes, but also to give them a general view of their programme, where the Programme Objectives (Sw."programmål") are very important.

Besides the National Tests we have special weeks for tests in every form, usually one occasion per term, when we try to co-ordinate at least one section of our tests to be able to give our students as fair and equivalent grades as possible. In addition to that teachers and classes agree about written tests and other ways of testing their knowledge. This is according to the curriculum that provides students with an influence on the education.

My experience is that you have to vary your teaching, the contents of the lessons, all the time - to some extent of course- to get the students' interest to remain and hopefully even increase.

But teaching 27 young people, more or less interested in going to school, at the same time in a sometimes almost crowded classroom with air that could have been fresher, is not easy. Individualizing is a beautiful word much liked by those who are in charge... Anyway, I'm still a teacher after quite a few years, I suppose because of all the wonderful young boys and girls who give you so much in return!