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Challenges and Teaching Materials in English for Young Learners in Sweden

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Recent European studies in the field of primary English education identify a number of challenges related to language development, motivation, and diversity of proficiency levels among learners. Nevertheless, early language instruction remains under-researched. The current study investigates challenges perceived by Swedish primary teachers of English and their thoughts and experiences regarding teaching materials. The study takes a special interest in picturebooks because they are often foregrounded as useful resources for promoting both motivation and language learning. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through an online questionnaire with 109 Swedish teachers for school years F–6. The findings reveal that the substantial heterogeneity of proficiency levels among learners is the biggest challenge facing teachers. In addition, the teachers reported challenges related to this diversity, such as a shortage of teaching materials to cater to varying needs and difficulties in engaging all learners in oral language production. Teaching materials used often comprise downloaded resources, coursebooks, or YouTube clips. Although many teachers are positive toward the potential of picturebooks as an instructional resource, most reported not using them. The findings are discussed in relation to the goals of early English instruction, the current understanding of young language learners, and communicative language teaching.

Keywords: coursebooks, differentiation, English language teaching, picturebooks, primary language instruction



Introduction

The academic field of English for young learners (EYL) has expanded substantially during the last decades with the increase in English instruction globally and the lowering of the age of onset (Garton & Copland, 2019). However, recent European studies conclude there are no long-term linguistic benefits from introducing English lessons early; in fact, learners beginning at the age of 10 or 11, instead of 7 or earlier, soon catch up (Baumert et al., 2020; Cadierno et al., 2020). At the same time, migration and varying amounts of out-of-school engagement with English contribute to the increasingly heterogeneous language proficiency among children in the same classroom. Moreover, and possibly related to such classroom diversity, studies show that some learners feel anxious about interacting in the target language (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009; Nilsson, 2019), whereas others are bored only a few years into language instruction (Cadierno et al., 2020; Fenyvesi, 2020). EYL thus appears to be less successful than it ought to be (Bland, 2019).

Relatively speaking, EYL is a rather new phenomenon, and there is a need to develop pedagogy that better aligns with the abilities of primary learners (Garton & Copland, 2019; Littlejohn, 2022). Prominent researchers in the field commonly advise teachers to include authentic children's literature, not only to promote literary and linguistic development but also to maintain motivation and bring in meaningful content (e.g., Bland, 2019, 2023; Mourão, 2016). Nevertheless, studies have found that literature and read-alouds are rare in primary English classrooms (e.g., Fuchs & Ross, 2022; Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011), and scholars have voiced concern that early language education relies too much on conventional coursebooks with fragmented and drill-like interaction (Bland, 2023; Ghosn, 2013).

Teaching languages to young learners is a complex task, and the role of English in the lives of children is rapidly changing in many contexts due to gaming and social media (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). To advance EYL and develop age-appropriate teaching approaches, calls have been made for more studies that focus on the role of teaching materials, give prominence to the voices of teachers, and respond to the challenges they face (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). In a large global survey of 4,459 teachers from 142 countries, Copland et al. (2014) asked primary school language teachers to report on the biggest challenges that they perceived in their daily teaching practices. Their findings revealed that the number one challenge was making learners speak the target language, followed by disciplinary difficulties, learner motivation, and dealing with mixed-ability classrooms, in that order. Not much is known about

whether these findings reflect the Swedish primary context and the approaches and materials employed.

Against this background, the current study aims to shed light on the challenges perceived by teachers of English in Swedish primary schools and to explore their thoughts and experiences in relation to teaching materials. In particular, the study examines whether the teaching materials include picturebooks and whether such multimodal narratives have the potential to address some of the challenges identified. Copland et al. (2014) underscore that academia and teacher education need to respond to the demands that face teachers in their everyday practice. Consequently, educational research must strive to bridge the gap between the overall aims of primary school language education and the professional realities of primary school language classrooms. The findings will be used to problematize the potential of teaching materials that teachers ask for and to discuss how these align with Communicative language teaching (CLT) and the nature of language learning in primary school. Although the study is limited in scopes, its findings should be of interest to policy makers, teacher educators, producers of teaching materials, and researchers in the field of early English instruction.

Background

The following section summarize central concerns in EYL, address the potential contributions of using picturebooks as a teaching resource, and give a brief overview of the Swedish primary school context.

Teaching and Learning in EYL

Language instruction in primary school needs to be adapted to young learners' implicit learning capacity and their focus on meaning (Littlejohn, 2022; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). The widely adopted CLT approach permeates the Swedish syllabus (*Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet* [Lgr22], 2022). This approach foregrounds functional target language use, authentic materials, interaction, and negotiation of meaning (Littlewood, 2013). In the case of young learners with limited mastery of a new language, these ambitions may present a challenge. With reference to CLT, Rixon (2019) argues that "if the term has any meaning for the teaching of children, it might serve best to express a general aspiration to make the language learning process meaningful to the learners" (p. 7). Similarly, Ohashi (2015) raises the relevant question of what key words such as *meaningful*, *functional* and *authentic* mean in the lives of young learners.

Studies have found motivation to be essential in EYL and closely related to the ambitions of CLT and meaningful language use (Fenyvesi, 2020; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017). To create meaning, young learners rely heavily on the “here and now” and comprehend the new language using the contextual and multimodal information available to them. The social interaction between them and their teacher is therefore pivotal, and teachers need to be responsive to learners in such interactions by providing scaffolding and abundant and adapted teacher talk (Bland, 2019; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). Furthermore, Ghosn (2019) argues that materials for language learning in primary school need to be engaging due to the reciprocal relationship between learning and motivation. Young learners report that tasks focusing on meaning and interaction—such as role-playing, communicating orally, watching videos, and playing games—foster motivation, whereas activities related to translation exercises, grammar, oral reading, and tests are perceived as demotivating (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2017). Conversely, as shown by Becker and Roos (2016), tasks that scaffold and encourage learners to move from reproductive to productive and creative target language interaction promote motivation and learner autonomy. Moreover, the increasing awareness of the long-term effects of negative emotions and attitudes in the early years underscores the affective dimensions of foreign language instruction. Therefore, steering documents in many countries foreground motivation, confidence, and agency as goals of EYL (Copland & Ni, 2019; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016).

Considering motivational aspects may be even more relevant in classrooms with diverse target language proficiency levels. The challenge of heterogeneity in primary English education has attracted attention among researchers in recent years (e.g., Çamlıbel-Acar, 2021; Fenyvesi, 2020; Kos, 2021a; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). Furthermore, studies have identified a prevalence of foreign language anxiety and reluctant learners in primary schools in Europe (Cadierno et al., 2021; Fenyvesi, 2020; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009; Nilsson, 2019). Speaking up in front of peers in a language one does not master can be quite “face-threatening” (Copland et al., 2014, p. 746), and for low achievers, motivation is closely interrelated with their sense of mastery (Çamlıbel-Acar, 2021). A Swedish study has concluded that what young learners with frequent anxiety themselves perceive as most conducive for their learning is teaching in full class, with introductions, linguistic input, and plenty of scaffolding, followed by oral practice in pairs or small groups (Nilsson, 2021). In a Danish study, primary language learners reported that the approach and support of the teacher are vital for decreasing anxiety (Fenyvesi, 2020). Conversely, activities where learners have to cope

on their own without enough scaffolding and support by the teacher are demotivating and risk aggravating anxiety (Kos, 2021a; Nilsson, 2021). At the same time, studies have revealed that more advanced learners may lose interest in the English subject in classrooms where they are not challenged and where the English they have acquired outside of school is not acknowledged (Çamlıbel-Acar, 2021; Hannibal Jensen, 2019; Kos, 2021a). However, empirical findings imply that teachers' efforts to individualize work in the mixed-ability classroom present significant problems in attending to low-achievers and maintaining their motivation and confidence while simultaneously challenging the more advanced learners and not neglecting oral interaction (Kos, 2021a). Furthermore, teacher and learner motivation impact each other mutually. Specifically, teachers who are enthusiastic, supportive, and responsive to young learners' engagement foster motivation (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019); on the other hand, if primary teachers of English feel frustrated and unable to meet the diverse needs of their learners, as suggested in recent studies (Çamlıbel-Acar, 2021; Kos, 2021a), this may create a negative cycle where both teachers and learners across the proficiency spectrum feel discouraged.

Picturebooks in EYL

There is a solid theoretical foundation for the use of picturebooks in EYL (e.g., Bland, 2019, 2023; Ghosn, 2013; Mourão, 2016). Involving learners in read-alouds of authentic picturebooks is a way of maintaining motivation while promoting linguistic development and nurturing literary, multimodal, and critical literacy (Bland, 2019; Ellis, 2018; Mourão, 2016). Picturebooks provide high-quality and engaging multimodal input that aligns well with children's learning and meaning making (Bland, 2023). They offer authentic language (vocabulary, grammatical structures, and formulaic sequences) with plenty of visual support. In addition, a read-aloud by the teacher is itself a pedagogical resource, focusing on meaning-making in a narrative that is enhanced as the teacher points, adjusts the voice, gestures, and dramatizes.

Studies have demonstrated the linguistic benefits of using picturebooks in EYL. A German study by Kaminski (2013) shows that it increases learners' vocabulary size and retention. In Taiwan, Sun (2020) found that read-alouds promote the development of comprehension strategies, as young learners focus on meaning and make use of both verbal and visual modes of interpretation. Following the gist but accepting not understanding every single word is an important and motivational experience for future multilingual readers. However, this approach is not applied in

regular coursebooks, which contain unambiguous and simplified texts written to cover certain linguistic elements.

Regarding mixed-ability classrooms, a Swiss study by Fuchs and Ross (2022) reveals how the scaffolding and joint meaning-making provided during teacher read-alouds make picturebooks accessible and engaging for learners of varying proficiency levels. Learners who do not feel very confident in English can draw on all the situated affordances of the picturebook, the teacher, and their peers and grasp basic vocabulary while concentrating on the narrative. As for more advanced learners, they can make use of more complex linguistic structures and vocabulary within the same picturebook. Accordingly, this multimodal genre has something to offer different learners in terms of both literary and linguistic value as they engage with the book and the read-aloud according to their own zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Moreover, several studies have concluded that read-alouds in EYL have the potential to increase oral classroom interaction (Fuchs & Ross, 2022; Ghosn, 2013; Kaminski, 2013; Li and Seedhouse, 2010); they inspire learners to use their linguistic resources to voice thoughts, questions, and reflections and join in collaborative meaning-making around engaging content. In a Swedish study, Ahlquist (2020) identifies affective benefits of using authentic literature, which in turn enhance cognition and language development. EYL teachers participating in empirical studies on picturebook read-alouds also perceive them to be beneficial for learner motivation. The joint experience contributes to a relaxed and safe atmosphere that fosters a positive attitude to English in school (Fojkar et al., 2013; Fuchs & Ross, 2022; Sun, 2020).

Whereas coursebooks avoid any sensitive topics and, thus, often fail to engage learners and connect to their life experiences (Bland, 2023), picturebooks foreground content over language and offer learners of varying proficiency levels fascinating narratives and topics related to hopes, fears, aspirations, everyday cultural issues, empathy, democratic values, intercultural understanding, and profound dilemmas of the human experience (Bland, 2023; Mourão, 2017). Exploring such stories resonates with the overall values of primary education. In addition, multimodal narratives can function as a springboard for a range of other activities to suit a particular group and that align with the intentions of CLT, by providing authentic and meaning-focused activities mediated through English.

In conclusion, primary English education presents several challenges as teachers strive to teach in accordance with CLT in heterogeneous classrooms while maintaining motivation among learners with diverse proficiencies. Picturebooks could be a useful resource, but studies indicate they are not commonly used (Fuchs & Ross, 2022; Garton et al., 2011; Mair, 2018). These concerns are brought together in the current study, where Swedish primary teachers of English share their perceived challenges and their thoughts on teaching materials that may or may not be available to them.

The Swedish Context

Sweden scores high in international English proficiency rankings (EF, 2021). English is commonly used in the media and many workplaces in Sweden, and many children receive abundant English input through online media and gaming (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). English instruction starts in school Year 3 (age 9–10) at the latest. However, many Swedish schools begin earlier and introduce the target language gradually. A total of 60 hours are allocated to English in Years 1–3, and 220 hours in Years 4–6. In general, English is taught by the class teacher, but not always.

All the benefits of including authentic children’s literature discussed above align well with the holistic aims of education in the Swedish curriculum (Lgr22, 2022), which emphasizes the interaction between language, learning, and identity. The syllabus for English defines the overall goals of compulsory English instruction and underscores the centrality of communication. “Tales” and “texts from various media” are mentioned as core content in Years 1–3 and 4–6 (Lgr22, 2022). There are no national tests, knowledge requirements, or grades until Year 6 (age 12–13). Furthermore, central aspects such as teaching approaches, materials, and the use of Swedish and English are not regulated. As a result, Swedish teachers of English have a lot of freedom and responsibility when it comes to choosing materials, providing learners with extensive and authentic English input, and preparing meaningful activities that foster motivation and confidence in all their young learners.

However, in a study investigating coursebooks produced for the Swedish market, Nordlund and Norberg (2020) found mechanical vocabulary activities to be rather frequent. Moreover, a study by Schröter and Molander Danielsson (2016) suggested that English teaching is not very communicative, and that picturebooks are uncommon in the Swedish primary context. In addition, teaching groups with heterogeneous language proficiencies has been identified as the major

challenge for teachers of English in Swedish upper secondary schools (Svensson, 2017). Nevertheless, research on EYL in Sweden is limited.

Aim and Research Questions

The current study aims to enrich our understanding of the experiences of teachers of EYL in Sweden when it comes to challenges they perceive and their thoughts regarding teaching materials. Such insights are fundamental for communities of teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and other stakeholders to advance language teaching for increasingly diverse groups of primary learners. The following research questions are addressed:

- What are the most pressing challenges perceived by primary teachers of English in Sweden in school Years 1–6?
- What experiences and preferences are expressed in relation to teaching materials in primary English teaching in general and picturebooks in particular?

The findings will inform a discussion on the potential of teaching materials, with a specific focus on picturebooks, to support teachers in addressing the most problematic aspects of teaching, in alignment with CLT in EYL.

Methodology

Data Collection

Guided by the research questions, an online self-report questionnaire with both Likert-scale items and open questions was designed. All the information and the questions were in Swedish. Since the rationale behind the questionnaire was to get an overview and encourage as many teachers as possible to participate, it only included seven questions, thus prioritizing breadth over depth. The first question concerned background, asking about school years in which the participants taught. Three open questions allowed teachers to share their thoughts on challenges and materials in their own words. Then, three Likert-scale questions with five response options concerned the teaching materials used and the attitudes and experiences related to using authentic English picturebooks. For each of these items, it was possible to add comments. The open questions allowed data collection without steering participants in any specific direction, whereas the Likert-scale items

provided data on where the teachers positioned themselves in relation to a number of specific options and perspectives.

In order to recruit practicing teachers across the country, a post was uploaded to two Swedish groups on Facebook, one for teachers of English in Years 1–3 and one for Years 4–6. The teachers were invited to share their thoughts as a backdrop to a research project about teaching materials for the subject of English in Swedish primary school by filling out the brief questionnaire. The post was uploaded in July 2021 to avoid the stress of the end of the school year, and it remained open for a few weeks.

The questionnaire was completed by 109 participants, who remained anonymous and reported only the school years in which they taught English. In general, slightly more than a third of them taught in lower primary school (Years 1–3) and the rest in upper primary (Years 4–6). It is, however, not possible to assign teachers to clear-cut groups since some teachers taught in years 3 and 4, for example, or in mixed-ability groups (as revealed in some responses to the open questions). At the end of the digital questionnaire, the participants received more information about an upcoming research project on picturebooks as teaching resources, and they were invited to add their email address and the municipality in which they taught if they were interested in receiving more information and possibly participating. Those interested named 38 different municipalities, which revealed that teachers from all over Sweden took part in the questionnaire, from Skåne to Lappland. The e-mail addresses were removed from the compiled questionnaire data, which were stored without any personal information at a secure online location at Stockholm University. As researchers' ethical and societal responsibilities include giving something back to the participants (Resnik, 2018), a summary of the findings was posted in the same Facebook groups a few months after the data collection.

Analysis

Quantitative responses to the item targeting teaching materials were awarded 1–5 points, where a higher score indicated higher frequency. Mean scores (M) were calculated for this item. However, as the quantitative elements are meant to serve as an overview rather than provide data for statistical analysis and generalizability, only descriptive statistics are presented in this study. The Likert-scale items are visually illustrated in the following section to offer an idea of the distribution of responses per item.

Qualitative content analysis was performed on the open question responses and comments added to the Likert-scale questions, as this is a useful approach in the search for similarities and differences among subjective experiences (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Given the brevity of responses and lack of contextual information, the analysis focused on the manifest level of interpretation, in other words, taking the responses at face value. Most of the responses and comments served as single-meaning units (i.e., conveyed one single idea) and were sorted inductively to form categories referring to similar content. Any responses involving several aspects were split and referred to different categories, or duplicated when they simultaneously addressed more than one aspect. Unique topics, namely those mentioned by only one teacher, have not been included in the analysis.

Findings

This section presents the results of the questionnaire data analysis. The analysis resulted in four categories pertaining to the most salient challenges: teaching mixed-ability groups, accessing useful materials, making learners speak English, and lacking sufficient lesson time. First, these challenges are described in corresponding sections. Subsequent sections address the used and requested teaching materials. A final section outlines teachers' attitudes toward using picturebooks. Data from the multiple-choice questions are reported in graphs, whereas the qualitative data are reported thematically, using excerpts from the participants (translated into English) to exemplify typical responses.

The Challenge of Teaching Mixed-Ability Groups

The challenge most frequently reported, by far, concerns the heterogeneity of English proficiency among learners in the same classroom. More than half of the responses (59 of 114) addressed this aspect. Typical responses included “The enormous differences in learners’ levels already in Year 1. From fluent to not knowing how to say, ‘My name is’” and “The enormous span in proficiency. From zero to fluent.” In both Year 1 and Year 4, teachers expressed concern about the mixed-ability classrooms that they face when they receive new groups of students.

Moreover, some participants pointed out that English is the school subject where such heterogeneity is most striking, “where I feel the span is the biggest.” Some teachers in the upper primary years attributed the diversity in Year 4 to previous English instruction, as their learners had been taught by different teachers in lower primary school. Teachers also highlighted the centrality

of extensive engagement with out-of-school English among many of their learners whereas others “never encounter the language.” Teaching large or mixed-age groups further adds to the challenge. In addition, the teachers relate the diversity to learners’ motivation and attitude toward English in school. Adapting to learners and “involving those who feel English is difficult/boring and stimulating those who feel English is too easy/boring” is a challenge.

In sum, the primary challenge addressed by the teachers revolves around the heterogeneous proficiency levels from the onset and throughout primary instruction, which also affect learners’ attitudes toward English in school. The struggle to “reach all learners on their level” is recurrent throughout the data.

The Challenge of Accessing Useful Materials

The second challenge refers to materials (attracting 19 responses). Some teachers lamented the lack of coursebooks and other English materials altogether, claiming that they were not allowed to buy any. However, the challenge of accessing appropriate teaching resources was more commonly linked to the issue of varying proficiency levels: “Finding materials that suit both the weaker and the stronger learners. I don’t have enough materials. I must make them myself.” The comments highlight the difficulty of finding and compiling teaching materials that meet the needs of diverse groups of learners while planning lessons on a joint topic or theme. Many pointed out that there are plenty of online resources to use, “but it takes time to find them and put them together so that it works.” Thus, teaching groups of diverse proficiency levels not only presents challenges during lessons but is also a time-consuming aspect of lesson preparation.

The Challenge of Making Learners Speak English

The third challenge identified in the analysis revolves around making learners speak English (13 responses). As illustrated by remarks such as “making the children dare to try to speak freely” and “the learners don’t dare speak English,” many teachers often struggled to engage learners in oral target language production. The predominant use of the word “dare” indicates that teachers did not attribute the learners’ reluctance to engage orally to disengagement or boredom; rather, they connected it to anxiety about oral target language production.

The Challenge of Lacking Sufficient Lesson Time

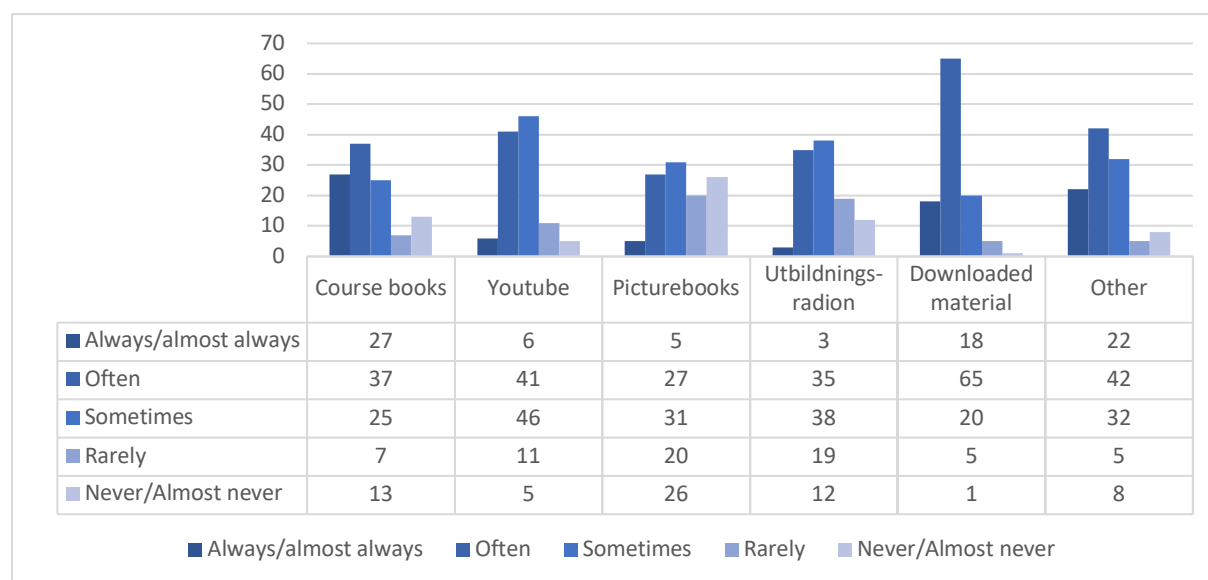
The fourth most common challenge refers to a lack of allocated lesson time for English (11 responses). A comment such as “Time to do everything with the puny 140 minutes/week” suggests that teachers felt that there are a lot of aspects to cover in a limited amount of time. Furthermore, “quality” is mentioned in relation to time. Some teachers experienced difficulties in prioritizing and choosing content for EYL, as the “possibilities are endless”. At the same time, the responses indicate that the shortage of teaching materials conditioned their teaching. The findings reflect a constant and time-consuming search for texts and materials, especially for teachers who did not have access to “readymade materials or books.”

The Teaching Materials Used

The second research question addressed the teaching materials used in English lessons, and the participants were asked to indicate how often they employed certain kinds of teaching resources (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Teachers' responses to the question “How often do you use the following kinds of teaching materials?”



The analysis revealed that downloaded materials were the most commonly used ($M = 3.86$), with flashcards and exercises added in the questionnaire as examples of such materials. “Other materials” was the second most common category ($M = 3.60$). The added comments indicate that this category comprises activities that the teachers have made themselves as well as films, drama,

and games. Coursebooks (physical and digital) were the third most used resource ($M = 3.53$), followed by YouTube ($M = 3.29$) and *Utbildningsradion* (The Swedish Educational Broadcast Company) ($M = 2.98$). Among the options provided, picturebooks were the least used teaching resource ($M = 2.49$), used *rarely*, *almost never*, or *never* by 42% of the participants.

The Teaching Materials Requested

A third of the participants reported being content with the teaching materials at their disposal, often resulting from years of collecting and compiling materials. Whereas some teachers missed having access to a coursebook, a few remarked that they were in no need of one. Others added that the issue of resources had improved with the access to digital tools.

On the other hand, the other two thirds of the participants were dissatisfied with the instructional resources available to them. Although many teachers regarded coursebook material as a foundation and a basic structure from which to adapt, the responses point to several problems with such material. The challenges connected to mixed-ability groups reemerged as a topic also in relation to teaching materials, with comments asking for graded materials to be produced on “many different levels, with a very big span.” Some teachers expressed a need for materials that newly arrived learners or learners with language disorders could work with independently. More common, however, were teacher calls for materials that would assist them in planning lessons around a joint topic in heterogeneous groups: “I would like materials that deal with the same thing but on various levels so that you can go through things in full class and then they can work on their own level.” The responses suggest that some teachers had individualized their English lessons with different materials and topics but were dissatisfied with this way of working, as “there is no joint whole when different learners have different kinds of texts.” To complement coursebooks, they would have liked extra materials “that would make it possible to simplify or go deeper,” to facilitate the lesson for some learners and challenge others.

Some teachers complained that their available materials were too simple, boring, traditional, or fragmented and lacked variation, leaving little room for creativity and a more holistic approach to language learning. In addition, there were calls for more teaching materials to practice specific skills (such as listening comprehension, grammar, or speaking and interacting) and more resources to assess learner progress. Some responses reflect a need for more digital materials, series, or films. For instance, one participant asked for series adapted for learners with other home languages than Swedish. Others expressed a preference for more analog teaching resources: “Physical materials!!!”

Furthermore, a demand for literary teaching resources was expressed by 15 of the teachers, either in the form of graded reader books with adapted language for different levels or in the form of authentic literature with a copy of the title for each learner. Many of the participants would have preferred the same title with versions for different learner levels and a teacher's manual for ideas on how to use the narrative in class. Thus, children's literature was primarily mentioned in terms of individual reading.

In sum, the teachers' requests referred to a variety of materials—digital or physical, holistic or geared toward specific skills. Nevertheless, the rationale for these calls was ultimately quite similar: engaging learners while catering to varying levels of competence in English.

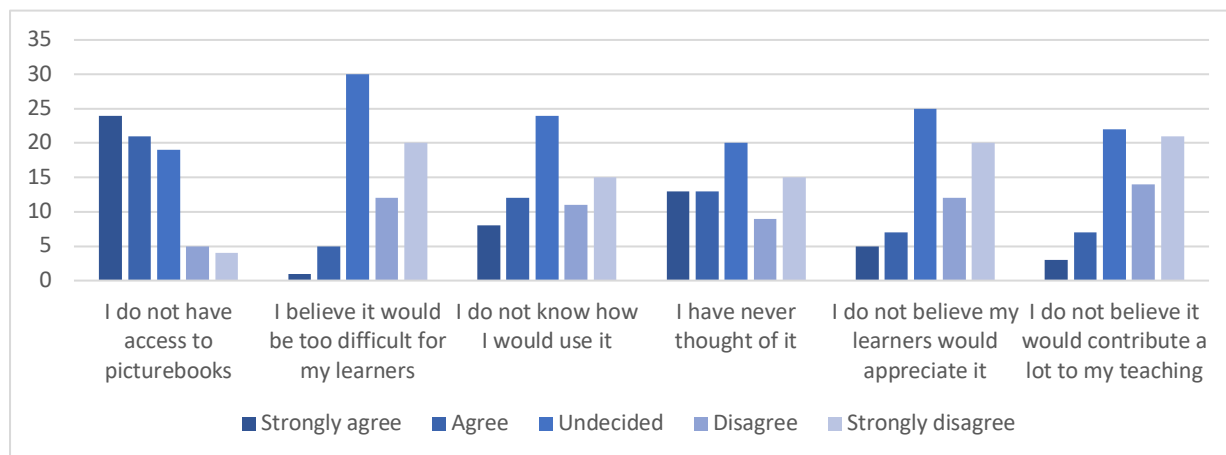
Using Authentic Children's Literature

The questionnaire included three questions specifically addressing the topic of using children's literature. An open question asked participants to add any picturebook titles they had been using during the previous school year, if any. Then, a multiple-choice question was directed at teachers who had *not* been using picturebooks during the previous school year, while another was directed at those who *had* been using them. However, about 30 teachers appear to have responded to both. It is possible that participants with actual experiences of working with picturebooks answered the first question by mistake. A comment like "I love using books in my teaching in many different ways" following the item about *not* using picturebooks suggests this to be the case. These responses negatively impact the validity of the quantitative answers to these questions. Nevertheless, the item generated informative responses (as illustrated in Figure 2) despite answers from teachers with varying experiences.

The statements to the multiple-choice question on not using picturebooks received between 67 and 73 responses (as six participants responded to some but not all of them). As visualized in Figure 2, many teachers did not have access to English picturebooks, which may help explain why many appeared never to have considered them as instructional resources. Furthermore, the results imply uncertainty about how to make use of picturebooks, although most participants believed that "learners appreciate authentic books" and that they may enrich language instruction. One rather representative comment was "I just haven't got around to it. But I really think it can contribute a lot to teaching."

Figure 2

Teachers' responses to the item "In case you have NOT used picturebooks in your teaching during this past year, to what degree do the following statements apply to you?"

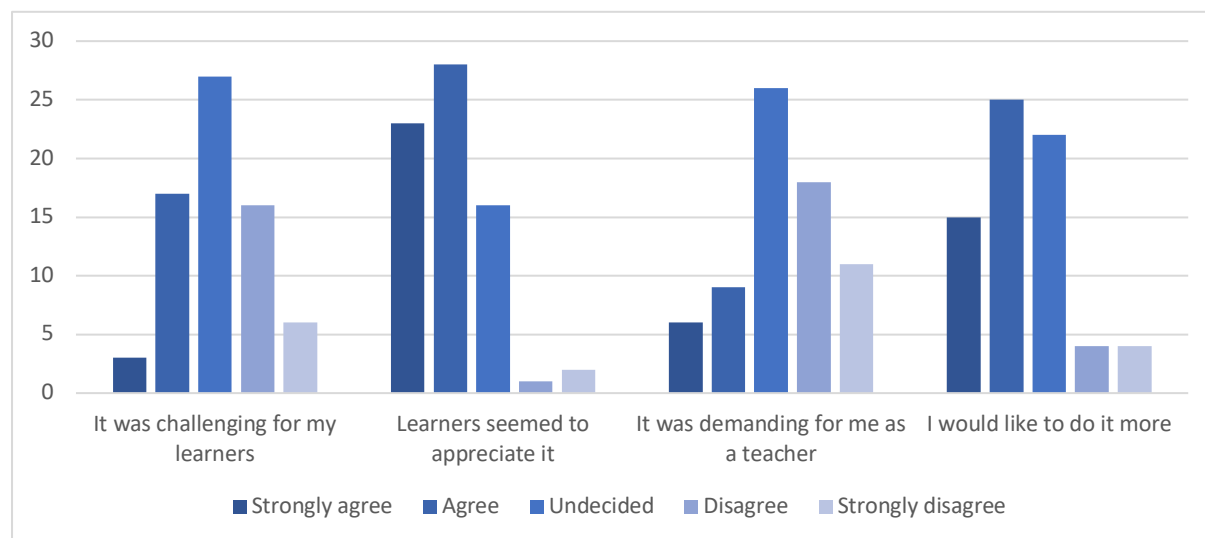


Notably, several teachers added remarks indicating that they did not understand what was meant by picturebooks (*bilderbücher*) in the present context. One teacher claimed never having heard of picturebooks but stated that “it sounds exciting.” Another one wrote, “I don’t understand what you mean... in our textbook there are pictures to talk about... Are you referring to other kinds of books?” It seems unlikely that primary teachers would be unfamiliar with the concept of picturebooks, but the comments indicate that these participants had not considered such literature in their teaching. Only a few teachers responded that they thought picturebooks would be too difficult for their learners. In contrast, some pointed out the opposite and feared that such multimodal books would be perceived as demotivating and childish. Several participants would like tips on titles that would be appropriate for their learners’ age group.

Figure 3 shows the results for the question directed at teachers who *had* been using picturebooks in the recent school year. This question attracted responses from 70 teachers. (The results in Figure 1 again suggest that a number of participants did not follow the actual instruction, although questions were formulated to account for teachers’ actual experiences.)

Figure 3

Teachers' responses to the item "In case you HAVE used one or several picturebooks in your teaching during this past year, to what degree do the following statements apply to you?"



As illustrated in Figure 3, a large majority of the responding teachers held positive attitudes toward using picturebooks. They expressed wanting to use this kind of literature more and believing it appeals to learners. At the same time, about half of the responses indicated that working with picturebooks had been challenging for primary learners, and more than 40% expressed that it was demanding on the part of the teacher. The varying experiences were also visible in the comments. Some were quite positive, referring to picturebooks as “fun” or “a goldmine,” whereas others were more negative or mixed. For example, one teacher had tried using a picturebook once but concluded that the group “didn’t manage it” and thus chose not to do it again. Another teacher pointed out that although some learners had referred to the picturebook used as “childish,” the teacher perceived that learner “were all ears, listening very attentively.” Yet another teacher underscored that picturebooks do not solve the problem of mixed-ability groups: “For some, it was far too difficult, some would have needed more repetition, for some it was good and for others almost too easy.”

Examples of titles that teachers had used included famous picturebooks such as *The Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Gruffalo* and traditional fairy tales such as *Snow White* or *Goldilocks*. Some teachers had also taken advantage of learners’ familiarity with Swedish titles translated into English, for example, books about Emil and Pippi by Astrid Lindgren and the Lasse-Maja series by Martin Widmark. In addition, some teachers reported using recorded books on YouTube. One teacher

added, “I usually read myself instead,” and went on to explain how muting the video and reading instead makes it easier to pause in the text, have learners repeat certain words, and make use of body language to enhance the reading.

Discussion

The current study seeks to highlight the challenges encountered by teachers of English in primary school in Sweden and to explore their experiences of and thoughts on instructional resources, with a particular focus on authentic picturebooks in English. The following discussion focuses on how the challenge presented by the mixed-ability classroom is interrelated to the other reported challenges. Moreover, it addresses the potential of picturebooks as a tool to facilitate differentiation and to develop teaching that is informed by CLT and our understanding of EYL. The section concludes with methodological considerations.

Diverse Proficiency Levels and Related Challenges

As regards the first research question, the most salient challenge reported by teachers in their daily practices revolves around the heterogeneous proficiency levels in English among learners. Many participants described rather extreme diversity, and they perceived this to be greater in English than in other school subjects. This obstacle is also closely linked to other challenges expressed by the participants; specifically, catering to the various needs of learners in mixed-ability classrooms is demanding during lessons, but it also requires considerable amounts of time for planning lessons and compiling and adapting teaching materials. Furthermore, making learners speak the target language was reported as one of the major difficulties. These findings echo those reported across hundreds of primary educational contexts in Copland et al.’s (2014) study, with the exception of discipline-related challenges, which were not brought up by the participants in the current study. In addition, the responses gathered from primary school teachers all over Sweden, who work in various school settings, further support the description of the challenges facing primary teachers of English as being “both myriad and common” (Copland et al., 2014, p. 755).

The heterogeneity in proficiency levels among primary learners of English is problematic for both teachers and learners. It is undeniably a challenging task for teachers to provide the kinds of contextualized input, appropriate scaffolding, and plentiful opportunities for responsive interaction that benefit learners across a wide spectrum of proficiency levels. Furthermore, such heterogeneity has a powerful impact on young language learners and the group dynamics in the classroom.

Particularly in the case of young learners, motivation and confidence are strongly related to the learning experiences and the classroom context (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). The diversity of competency levels is arguably one of the reasons teachers find themselves struggling to make all their learners engage in oral communication; learners who perceive that their language proficiency is far behind that of the classmate sitting next to them or of the more outspoken learners in class are less likely to volunteer to speak, as suggested in other studies (Kos, 2021b; Nilsson, 2021). Moreover, the teachers mention boredom among both high- and low-proficiency primary learners, which mirrors findings in larger Scandinavian studies (e.g., Cadierno et al., 2020; Fenyvesi, 2020). Such trends are alarming and stand in stark contrast to the overarching aims of primary language education, which include maintaining motivation, building confidence, and preventing the emergence of language anxiety, as foregrounded by scholars in the field of EYL (Copland & Ni, 2019; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016). In fact, Nikolov (2016) argues that the sooner English is introduced, the more challenging it is to maintain positive attitudes among learners. Plausibly, orchestrating meaningful activities that sustain motivation gets easier as learners become slightly more proficient (Cadierno et al., 2020). If language instruction fails to engage and feel relevant to primary learners, “the younger the better” assumption may instead result in “the younger the more bored.”

The experiences shared by the participating teachers in the present study are likely not surprising to anyone working in primary education. Furthermore, the findings resonate with those in Svensson’s (2017) study, where upper secondary teachers of English in Sweden reported that what they found most challenging about their work was dealing with linguistically heterogeneous classrooms, struggling to accommodate both lower and higher achievers. Hence, managing diversity appears to be the primary challenge for English teachers throughout Swedish compulsory school. This diversity is likely to remain and needs to be expected and addressed. The data in the current study convey high professional goals; the teachers are attentive to varying needs among their students, and they want to develop effective strategies to accommodate those needs and teach English in a way that is perceived as engaging and relevant to students. The accounts of teachers need to be taken seriously by researchers and policy makers in order to assist teachers in developing constructive ways of advancing pedagogy that consider the diverse competency levels in the

classroom while not neglecting the paramount importance of teachers and the contextualized classroom interactions that they can orchestrate.

Individualization or Differentiation?

The second research question addressed teachers' experiences and preferences in relation to teaching materials. In line with Svensson's (2017) conclusions, the findings in this study suggest teacher dissatisfaction and frustration with the availability of strategies and materials to deal with the diverse classroom, where "one-size-fits-all" materials and approaches are not applicable. While many participants expressed an ambition to gather learners around a joint classroom topic despite their linguistic diversity, others called for materials that could help them individualize the lessons and have learners work more independently. A few participants wanted materials that allow learners to practice certain skills and assessment components at the end of units to keep track of learner achievement. Such requests are understandable coming from teachers who struggle with the wide range of language proficiencies in their classrooms, although it is not possible to judge from the brief comments how teachers would like to use such materials in their teaching. Nevertheless, the ambition to individualize English lessons is a cause of concern in relation to our current knowledge about language instruction in primary school. As previously discussed, the teacher's ability to interact with learners and provide extensive and contextualized target language input is pivotal in EYL. Moreover, young learners' motivation hinges on opportunities for engaging and meaningful language use. Although the practice of specific skills certainly has a place in any language classroom, increasing individualized work implies more focus on vocabulary and grammar activities, which are often not only trivial and mechanical (Ghosn, 2013; Nordlund & Norberg, 2020) but also demotivating (Mihaljević Djigunović & Nikolov, 2019). As argued by Tomlinson (2000, section "What makes differentiation successful"), teaching needs to move beyond having "a group of students that frequently does 'dull drill' and another that generally does 'fluff.'" In addition, activities focusing on language elements must be complimented with plenty of recycling and meaningful interaction for language acquisition to take place (Hestetræet, 2019; Nation, 2007). Notably, Hestetræet (2019) points out that the transition from explicitly focusing on vocabulary to applying new words in more authentic interactions appears to present a challenge for learners as well as their teachers, which is not made easier in mixed-ability classrooms where learners use different materials. Unsurprisingly, empirical results also suggest that individualizing lessons increases the workload for teachers and that it has a negative impact on both the classroom

atmosphere and the teacher's ambitions to foster confidence and self-esteem in learners (Kos, 2021a).

The responses shared by the participating teachers can also be interpreted as a call for help with strategies to differentiate instruction with young learners. While the concepts *individualization* and *differentiation* are sometimes used interchangeably, according to Smets (2017), differentiation refers to providing “inclusive educational opportunities for a wide variety of learners” (p. 2074). Instead of focusing on special needs and abilities among individual learners and tracking them into independent work according to the teacher's instructions, differentiation entails focusing on goals and presenting learners with diverse activities of varying content, levels of difficulty and abstraction, and with different ways of processing content in pursuit of the same goals (Blaz, 2016; Tomlinson, 2000, Wallberg, 2019). Accordingly, the subject of differentiation is the level of support, not the learners (Littlejohn, 2022). A differentiated approach to teaching benefits all learners and allows them to work according to their interests, skills, and preferences, which in turn fosters learner agency and builds a sense of classroom community (Blaz, 2016; Wallberg, 2019). However, with young language learners, differentiation is a complex task, so teachers need to be prepared and equipped with a rich repertoire of strategies and skills to provide such learning conditions (Smets, 2017). Consequently, research looking into approaches to help differentiate early language teaching is urgently needed.

Meaning-Focused Language Learning

A content-focused teaching approach aligns with learners' free-time involvement with the target language. Learners who interact with English outside school, for instance, when they watch videos or play computer games, do so for communicative and meaningful purposes. Pinter (2019) argues that the way in which many young learners engage with challenging online games in English tells us that activities that are meaning-focused and involve a lot of repetition are more likely to attract learners and increase their sense of confidence. Moreover, lessons in EYL should center around meaningful input and output, especially in the primary classroom, where implicit learning is powerful (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019). Speaking to this point, Littlejohn (2022) asserts that young learners do not acquire languages in a way that can be externally planned by the teacher. Instead, attention needs to be redirected, from focusing on the language to engaging learners in meaningful interaction and language use. Accordingly, he suggests that rather than providing

activities that explicitly focus on language, language teaching should center on tasks that prioritize meaning, support learner interactions, and facilitate their communication of ideas, questions and thoughts. This approach leads to motivation on a deeper level, where English can be used for something more than simply offering young learners a bit of fun (Littlejohn, 2022). In this regard, a picturebook may be a useful resource to gather learners around, with content that ignites imagination and engagement. Picturebook read-alouds afford ample opportunities for oral practice and joint meaning-making and may function as a springboard for a range of differentiated activities and work modes.

Picturebooks as an Unexploited Resource

The second research question also concerned teachers' experiences and preferences in relation to using picturebooks in primary English teaching. In general, the teachers reported very positive attitudes and showed an interest in using authentic children's literature, although many of them had never used them. Others were more hesitant and skeptical toward picturebooks as teaching materials. Thus, the current findings suggest that many Swedish primary learners never experience English picturebook read-alouds in school. This aligns with findings from previous studies (Fuchs & Ross, 2022; Garton et al., 2011). In addition, the data foregrounds two reasons to account for the absence of authentic children's literature in EYL, namely accessibility and preparedness, echoing concerns addressed by Bland (2019). Although teachers can order books from libraries, they lack support and advice on useful and age-appropriate titles. Teachers expressed a fear that picturebooks would be too challenging or too childish, both of which could potentially demotivate learners. Therefore, it is important that teachers have access to books of high quality that are relevant to each age group (Bland, 2013, 2023). Nowadays, there are picturebooks for all ages, including teenagers and adults. In addition, wordless picturebooks and graphic novels have gained popularity. Nevertheless, these books need to reach both teachers and school librarians. In order for picturebook work to be successful, teachers are encouraged to choose books that they themselves like, with their own learners in mind (Bland, 2013). If picturebooks are to be used as teaching resources, teachers need to be able to browse and read the actual artefacts, not simply order books they have never seen.

Furthermore, teachers appear to feel unprepared for how to exploit picturebooks in English teaching, as found in previous research (Fuchs & Ross, 2022). Their hesitation suggests that they are aware that skillful mediation in a picturebook read-aloud is not as straightforward as it may

seem. Since teachers are pivotal for the success of read-alouds (Bland, 2019; Ghosn, 2013), teacher education plays an important role in supporting teachers to explore how multimodal narratives can be mediated and interactive read-alouds can be orchestrated in the primary classroom.

On a positive note, using picturebooks as teaching material has the potential to address many of the challenges reported in the current study—namely dealing with heterogeneous proficiencies, finding engaging and useful materials, and stimulating oral target language interaction. This potential has been shown in previous studies (e.g., Fuchs & Ross, 2022; Li & Seedhouse, 2010). Moreover, including various and creative ways of responding to picturebooks is one way of differentiating instruction (Bland, 2023). In relation to CLT, these multimodal narratives offer rich and contextualized target language input, with the *meaningful*, *authentic* content and the *functional* language use that Ohasi (2015) associates with CLT in primary language education. Accordingly, picturebook read-alouds in primary teaching are an avenue worth exploring in more depth, for teachers and scholars alike.

Limitations of the Study

The current study comes with several limitations. First, the questionnaire was posted in groups for English teachers on Facebook. These teachers have made a choice to join such groups, and while their motives may be quite diverse, they may not be representative of Swedish primary teachers of English. Second, the questionnaire format did not give room for elaboration on what participants imply with words like *individualization*, *individual-based teaching*, and *differentiation*. Third, some of the teachers responded both to questions directed at teachers who had *not* used picturebooks and to those directed at teachers who *had* used them, which negatively impacts the validity of the data and the conclusions that can be drawn in this regard. The instruction to answer either of the two questions could have been made clearer. Nevertheless, although a clear distinction cannot be made regarding the two groups of teachers, their beliefs and experiences contribute with important perspectives. Lastly, a certain self-presentation bias may have influenced the data; the teachers may have wanted to report on practices that align slightly more with their ideals than with their actual teaching practice (Kopcha & Sullivan, 2007). However, the anonymity of the questionnaire and the fact that teachers participated on their own initiative may have had a positive impact on their willingness to provide accurate responses. Furthermore, the results have not been used for any statistical analysis that might have been skewed by the aforementioned limitations; rather, their

purpose is to offer a snapshot of teachers' experiences and choices of teaching materials. Given the study's focus on materials, the questionnaire did not include items related to activities. Therefore, nothing can be said about the role of, for example, the songs, drama, writing, games, and presentations that are commonly used in EYL classrooms, with or without the support of teaching materials.

Conclusion

The current study reports on the experiences of 109 primary school teachers of English in Sweden. Their findings provide a strong indication of the challenges they face in their everyday practices. These challenges revolve around the heterogeneous English language proficiency that emerges from the very start of instruction and that remains throughout primary education. Needless to say, teaching learners who know very little English and who perceive English as a truly foreign language alongside learners who are rather fluent and interact with English in their free time on a daily basis is a daunting task. Other challenges highlighted in the study concern accessing useful materials, engaging all learners in target language interaction, and having limited lesson and preparation time. All of these aspects are likely to be related to heterogeneity. While it is natural for learner proficiency to vary in all school subjects, the findings suggest that the diversity is more extreme in the subject of English. Extensive linguistic heterogeneity in target language proficiency in Sweden is evidently the new normal.

Furthermore, as the goal of English education is to encourage communication and develop interactional skills, the prevalence of learners opting not to engage and teachers considering more individual work is problematic. During the first years of primary school, the dynamic interplay between the learners, the teacher, and the tasks has a powerful impact on developing and maintaining learner motivation. To address this complex web of challenges, studies need to explore new teaching approaches and materials. The current study simply offers a glimpse into primary school teachers' experiences and concerns. The findings indicate that these teachers hold positive attitudes about picturebooks as a resource in their English teaching, but they also demonstrate that many do not have access to them and are unsure of how to use them. In order to allow more young learners to engage with this multifaceted resource, studies need to devote increasing attention to the *how* rather than the *why* of authentic literature use and read-alouds in EYL. Hopefully, studies shedding light on the perspectives of not only teachers but also learners may spark ideas for future collaborations and empirical studies that respond to the realities of the primary classroom.

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