

Changing English in a Changing World: The Case of English as a School Subject in Sweden

Marie Källkvist (Linnaeus University)

Alastair Henry (Lund University)

Jenny Bergström (Uppsala University)

Elin Nylander (Lund University and Eslöv Folk High School)

School subjects are reflections of society (Sundberg 2021), and in Sweden interest in learning English emerged in the seventeenth century, a consequence of growing mobility on the European continent (Bratt 1977). It was not until 1807 that English was first introduced as a school subject, however. Initially, English was available only at the upper-secondary level. It was an elective subject, and students had to find their own teacher (Bratt 1977). Societal change led to further educational reforms and widening school participation, and English gradually enjoyed higher educational status. Major milestones are to be found in 1946, when English replaced German as the first foreign language learnt in schools, and again in 1955 with the introduction of a national curriculum where English became a compulsory subject for all students from school year 5 (age 12) upwards. Since then, the starting age has been successively lowered. Currently, it varies between the ages of seven and nine, depending on local policy. At present, English is the only mandatory foreign language in compulsory education. It means that all students in Sweden study English for a minimum of seven years, from ages 9–16. Since a vast majority of young people continue their education at the upper secondary level, English is often studied for an additional period, ranging from one to three years. At the upper secondary level, English is a compulsory subject in the first and second years, depending on the national program on which students are enrolled. It means that for most students, English is studied for between nine and thirteen years.

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As in many other parts of the world, conditions for the learning and teaching of English have changed considerably in recent decades, not least as a consequence of digitalization and increasing use of digital technologies in and beyond the classroom. In different ways, the articles in this special issue consider the effects that these changing circumstances are having for the subject. Growing access and exposure to English through online media and digital activities has resulted in a diversity of proficiency profiles. For students with rich encounters with English beyond the classroom, higher levels of proficiency are often observed (Lindgren and Muñoz 2013; Sundqvist 2009; Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012; Sylvén 2022, 2025). These rich encounters with English provide opportunities for incidental learning of English (Lindgren and Muñoz 2013). As research with primary and secondary English teachers has revealed, there are considerable challenges involved in meeting the needs of students with diverse proficiency profiles (Sylvén 2022, 2025).

Another feature of contemporary times is transnational mobility. For various reasons, people move away from their home country. They can seek international education or work opportunities. Migration can also take place for reasons of economic insecurity, to flee from a repressive regime, or as a consequence of the effects of climate change. For many dependent children, encounters with the educational system and the prominent role that English has in Swedish society can differ greatly from their home countries. Transnational movements such as these not only increase the diversity of experiences of English and further expand the range of proficiency levels: they also add to the diversity of first languages found in the English classroom. It means that in many contexts, Swedish can no longer be relied on as a shared language resource (Bergström, Jonsson and Norlund Shaswar 2025; Källkvist et al. 2024).

Another societal change involves educational policy, specifically increasing requirements on the part of government that teaching be based on research and best practice. First articulated in the 2010 Education Act, this places new expectations on schools, teachers and researchers. Even now, some sixteen years later, evidence-based practice remains more of a vision than a reality. As recent studies have revealed, there is a lack of research that can provide a solid underpinning for the teaching of English in Swedish schools (e.g., Bergström 2023; Elgemark et al. 2023; Gunnarsson 2025; Källkvist et al. 2017; Stridsman 2024).

Reflecting how changes such as these affect the various stakeholders in English education—students, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers—the contributions to this special issue address the differing ways in which the landscape of English education in Sweden is changing. In the first two articles, the focus is on the student. Reporting on findings from a study on interactional competence in high-scoring L2 learners’ agreement sequences, **Erica Sandlund** and **Pia Sundqvist** highlight how proficiency is acquired through recurrent participation in target language interaction, as well as through media input and instruction. For the highly proficient, high-scoring learners in their study, Sandlund and Sundqvist could show how engagement in interactional work in communicative tasks—being attentive, setting examples for types of possible contribution, and inviting viewpoints—was beneficial for the students’ co-participants. Reflective of the rich interactional experiences that many young people can have in extramural encounters (Sundqvist 2024), Sandlund and Sundqvist found extended sequences that did not sound like elicited test conversations and were reminiscent of the everyday conversations that take place in natural environments. They argue, thus, that there is a need for teachers to be aware of the types of interactional practice common in young people’s use of English in encounters that take place away from the classroom. In an article reporting on the development, implementation and evaluation of a vocabulary learning task, **Elin Nylander** describes how, in the communicatively oriented environment of the English classroom, reliance is often placed on incidental learning. While this approach is likely to reflect the ways in which students frequently acquire an extensive vocabulary in naturalistic environments, she argues that it can create problems when there is a need to engage with academically-oriented texts. To achieve a more balanced approach to vocabulary learning, and to better prepare students for the challenge of encounters with lexically rich content (such as in university-level textbooks), Nylander highlights the need for students to have opportunities to work with intentional vocabulary learning.

In the next five contributions, the focus shifts to teachers and teacher education. In their article exploring the ways in which pre-service teachers can become equipped to work in primary classrooms characterized by widely varying proficiency levels, **Parvin Gheitasi** and **BethAnne Paulsrud** describe how variation can stem from a number of factors. In addition to the unequal quality of instruction and the increasing linguistic

diversity of the student population, they also point to a constantly changing landscape of encounters with English beyond the classroom. Arguing that disparities in students' experiences of English demand a differentiated approach to instruction, they highlight the challenges that teachers face in meeting the needs of students in the highly heterogeneous groups found in contemporary classrooms. In this light, they present a differentiated instruction (DI) framework that provides a means to adjust content, processes, and products to meet the unique needs of individual students in diverse groups. In light of the changes in young people's experience of English, they argue that differentiated teaching needs to form a central element in the preservice education of primary teachers, and that it should encompass not only lesson planning, but also the creation of supportive classroom environments. With a similar focus on teacher education, **Katherina Dodou** presents a model for supporting the development of literary competences in English instruction that has been developed by Diehr and Surkamp (2015). Dodou argues that the model can provide a robust tool for English teacher education, and that it can support preservice teachers in planning and enacting meaningful literature instruction. As a means of fostering competent readers of literature in English, she argues that the model not only provides the means to identify what to teach and how to support the planning of instruction, but also a way of thinking that can empower future teachers in the work of implementing teaching that is varied, engaging, and meaningful. In an innovative and thought-provoking article examining how hegemonic English can affect the learning of other languages, **Justyna Legutko** sets out ideas for the establishment of a collaborative environment where teachers of English and other (foreign) languages can identify areas of mutual interest. Similar to metacognitive and strategy-based approaches to L2 pedagogy, Legutko explains how cross-curricular teaching practices can provide a complement to those that focus on multilingual language use. In describing a cross-curricular approach, Legutko explains how teachers can draw on the subject elements of English to forge connections between language subjects. In this way, English can provide a means for bridging across the curriculum. In the next article, **Joyce Kling** and **Slobodanka Dimova** similarly focus on subject content, here highlighting the changing role of intercultural competence. Noting how intercultural competence has seen major transformations in recent years, and how these mirror broader societal-level changes in education and transnational communication, they

describe how this has affected the content of teaching. They argue that English is currently being repositioned as a subject area in which global challenges can be addressed, and where global citizenship can be nurtured. It is a subject area where, along with other (foreign) languages, intercultural understanding and adaptation to plurilingual and pluricultural contexts have emerged as central objectives. To illustrate these ideas, Kling and Dimova draw on data from a large-scale project that examined the ways in which language teachers in Denmark perceive and approach the teaching of intercultural competence. **Jenny Bergström** investigates instructional and institutional practices in English language education in the Language Introduction Program (LIP), an individual transition program for newly-arrived migrant students aged 16–19. Drawing on findings from research employing a discourse analytical approach, Bergström points to the low institutional status of the LIP. She describes how, in institutional discourse, LIP students are positioned as deviating from the norm in lacking language skills. Analyses additionally show how English language education in the LIP is positioned as complex, artificial, and problematic. However, Bergström also shows that there can be ways of resisting stereotyped perceptions of LIP students and LIP English-language education. She suggests that by acknowledging that English-language education in LIP classrooms might be different—but of no less value—teachers and school managers can create a new space of diversity and resistance. She argues that in preservice and in-service education, it is important to provide spaces where processes of othering can be challenged. In the final article with a focus on teaching practice, **Josep Soler** draws on research within the field of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics to focus on linguistic justice through pedagogical translanguaging and recognition of multiple varieties of English. Soler's article centers on how teachers of English and other stakeholders in education can support linguistic diversity in the language classroom. Using linguistic justice theory, Soler discusses how the incorporation of students' first languages and recognition of different varieties and accents of English can create more equitable and inclusive classrooms. Soler also discusses how listening as a political act and forming a 'listening subject position' is essential in the empowerment of learners of English in the Swedish context and beyond.

For the final two articles, the focus switches to researchers, and the ways in which changes in encounters and uses of English can affect the

conceptualization of key psychological phenomena, such as language anxiety and motivation. In her article, **Sophia Juul** addresses the conceptualization of language anxiety—one of the most studied emotions in classroom-based language learning—and its operationalization in research undertakings. Revisiting the classic conceptualization of language anxiety in seminal work by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), Juul provides a critical appraisal of its context-sensitive nature. Reflecting on the changing role that English plays in the lives of young people in technologically advanced countries such as Sweden, Juul highlights differences in the experiences of language anxiety among the learners of Spanish as a foreign language that Horwitz studied in the 1980s, and those of students learning English in contemporary classrooms. By casting light on the very different experiences of these contrasting populations, Juul's article underscores the need to develop context-sensitive conceptualizations of investigated phenomena. In the final article, **Alastair Henry** and **Meng Liu** situate debates on the viability of paradigmatic models of motivation for language learning in the context of changes involving the nature and status of English. Arguing that in contexts such as Sweden, English can be viewed more as a social accomplishment than a personal aspiration, they question whether a model of motivation centered on a future-oriented and identity-focused construct, such as Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, can reliably predict motivation for language learning. In an age of digital hyperconnectivity, and with the increasing commodification of English, they suggest that the self-appraisal processes characteristic of L2 learning are more likely to take place in the context of social and societal expectations. Rather than appraisals that involve identity (and which might be formulated as 'Who am I?' questions), appraisals are more likely to take place in relation to social, group, and societal norms connected to L2 proficiency (and which can be expressed as 'How am I?' questions).

The ten articles in this special issue not only reflect the diverse ways in which changes in English are affecting the various stakeholders involved in language education. They also shed light on the responses that have emerged in teaching practice, and through practice-focused research. We hope that insights from these articles can support continued work in developing responsive pedagogies, and that they can provide inspiration for research that can support language education in a context where encounters with English continue to change.

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