Teaching English in Multilevel Classes
How do teachers at Swedish secondary schools face this challenge?
The aim of the study was to investigate how teachers of English in secondary schools experience the challenge of adapting their instruction to meet their students’ differences and needs as learners. Its ultimate purpose was to provide useful information for the development of English teaching and learning practices. As a means to achieve this, six active secondary school teachers of English, working at different schools located in Central Sweden, were interviewed. The method used to collect data was semi-structured interviews, rendering the study qualitative in nature. The concrete research questions posed were the following: What attitudes do the English teachers have towards ability grouping? How do the English teachers experience the challenge of instructing students with different needs as learners? The results indicated that there were rather divergent attitudes among the teachers towards ability grouping. Although, most participants could see that ability grouping would be advantageous in the sense that it would facilitate the teaching situation. A one-size-fits-all type of instruction seemed to be employed by most teachers in the study, where “tailoring” was used to adapt instruction. The study concluded that there were some teachers who seemed to face these challenges more effectively than others, which was also visible in the way they perceived their success in doing so.

**Key words:** multilevel classes, ability grouping, differentiated instruction, English teaching, secondary school, Sweden
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1 Introduction

Early on during my placement studies I was made aware of the challenge of teaching – what I have experienced to be – large and multilevel classes. In my opinion, the fact that classes in English are heterogeneous with, for example, a great span of proficiency among students, can be tricky for a teacher, due to the fact that English as a subject not only involves communication in English as a tool for learning, but also as one of the main learning objectives. How can a teacher meet the needs of the different students in this type of class so that they are all appropriately challenged and their various needs as learners met?

It is often said that the instruction of students in school is mostly located at the level where a majority can keep up well, and thus disregards the ones who would benefit from instruction at other levels (Carlgren, Klette, Mýrdal, Schnack, & Simola, 2006). However, research shows that it is important that the level of instruction is adapted to the student for learning to take place, and it is hence vital that teachers practise an instruction that is differentiated (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

The latest Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class and the Recreation Centre 2011, Lgr 11, states that “[t]eaching should be adapted to each pupil’s circumstances and needs” and, furthermore, be “based on pupils’ backgrounds, earlier experience, language and knowledge” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 10). One way of adapting the instruction to individual students’ preconditions has traditionally been, and still is, to group them according to their ability or level of knowledge (Giota & Emanuelsson, 2011). However, in a time of a school for all, with an inclusive approach, there is a need for teachers to be able to meet students’ different needs within a regular group. In addition, research has shown that the formation of more homogeneous groups “in general does not influence the students’ results in a positive direction” (Skolverket, 2009, p. 33, my translation).

1.1 Aim

The aim with the present study is to investigate how teachers of English in secondary schools experience the challenge of adapting their instruction to meet their students’ differences and needs as learners. Ultimately, its aim is to provide useful information for the development of English teaching and learning practices.

In order to achieve this, a number of active secondary school teachers of English were interviewed. The concrete research questions posed are the following:
What attitudes do the English teachers have towards ability grouping?
How do the English teachers experience the challenge of instructing students with different needs as learners?

2 Background
In this section, the background is presented under five different themes. The different themes are: An outline of the problem, Ability grouping, Differentiated Instruction, Multilevel classes and Changing classroom practice.

2.1 An outline of the problem
It is common knowledge among teachers that students differ from each other in many ways (concerning level of proficiency, learning abilities and style as well as motivation), and that these individual traits will influence them as learners. It is also an area that has been widely researched in order to find out what constitutes a good language learner (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, “[t]here are many questions about how the existence of individual differences should influence instruction” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 92). Many researchers argue that it does not seem reasonable for a teacher to design a particular instruction style specifically suited for each and every student in a class (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Tomlinson, 2001; Ur, 2012). Nevertheless, there is little doubt that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ type of instruction, as Tomlinson (1999) calls it, where students’ differences, in terms of for example learner style, are not taken into account, will not result in a successful learning environment (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The implication of this type of instruction is that students are “expected to do the same thing, at the same time, in the same way” (Ur, 2012, p. 236). But what Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) point out, regarding the students of today, is that:

they are also young people who live in a world of personalization — at least outside of school. They are accustomed to watching a particular television show when it’s convenient rather than when it’s broadcast. [...] They order computers specifically designed for their needs. They get news on demand and information they need when they need it. In school, however, we teach them as though their variance in readiness, individual interests, and particular approaches to learning were of no consequence. It is becoming increasingly difficult to pretend that batch processing of a vastly diverse student population supports them as learners or that we are
preparing them for productive citizenship in a world with complexities, uncertainties, and challenges that demand the very best from each of them. (p. 4)

This discrepancy that Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) describe has also come to the attention of Skolinspektionen, the Swedish School Inspectorate. In one of their reports Skolinspektionen (2010) similarly points out that the way students encounter English in school compared to the way they encounter English outside of school is very different. According to the authority, this difference is “something worth considering in the pursuit to adapt instruction to students' interests and needs” (2010, p. 23, my translation). At the very least, students' differences should be taken into account by practicing a varied type of instruction, i.e. by diversifying the content, process and product so that the students' individual needs are at least sometimes met (Hedge, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ur, 2012).

The current Swedish school curriculum (Lgr11) is designed in a way that gives teachers of English at secondary school the freedom to choose for example the content and methods for teaching (Skolverket, 2011), and this seems to imply a great deal of potential for adapting the instruction to learner needs and interests. According to Griffiths and Keohane (2000, p.2), “[t]he foreign language classroom has a flexibility unavailable in other subjects”, due to the fact that foreign language teachers are not restricted by demands for certain texts or topics, but instead may choose what content they think would help students reach the learning objectives.

Then again, this freedom in the regulatory documents does not guarantee that teachers are successful in adapting to students' needs and circumstances. On the contrary, the two most recent reports regarding English instruction in Sweden from Skolinspektionen (2010, 2011) maintain that English teaching at the secondary school level has not taken students' differences in terms of interests, previous experiences and needs into sufficient consideration. Although this was not true of every school observed, the reports showed that differentiation in terms of instruction was poor in most cases. Students were often expected to do the same thing in the same way, resulting in idle students becoming frustrated while waiting either to get help or for an extra assignment. Skolinspektionen (2011) found that many teachers did not consider students' different experiences, backgrounds and interests in their instruction because they experienced it as hard and therefore tended to treat the students as a homogeneous group.

On the other hand, even if numerous observed lessons left much to be desired, in terms of adaptation to students' needs, there were also several good examples. Lessons deemed as
successful in terms of meeting students' different needs gave students options to choose from, e.g. assignments that could be carried out in different ways or teaching materials and assignments adjusted to different levels of proficiency.

Factors that influence teachers' possibilities to adapt instruction has been found to be the “absence of material resources to meet student needs, insufficient time to teach all students and, above all, lack of training and skills to differentiate classroom instruction” (Gaitas & Martins, 2017, p. 550).

2.2 Ability grouping

Ability grouping has traditionally been used in English instruction in Sweden. Usually, students are placed in groups on the basis of their level of knowledge of English or their perceived pace of learning (Giota & Emanuelsson 2011; Stensmo, 2008). In most cases, the idea is to form groups where students are on a 'similar level', resulting in more homogeneous groups, and thus to overcome challenges in meeting students' diverse learning needs.

A report by Giota and Emanuelsson (2011) showed that this principle for grouping students was still widely used in Swedish schools, as nearly a quarter of the schools studied practised some kind of ability grouping. Since research has shown that this type of grouping may have negative consequences for the students themselves and their learning (Skolverket, 2009), this was a somewhat surprising result to Giota and Emanuelsson (2011). Slavin (1990) argued that since research has shown that ability grouping does not have the desired effect on student achievement, secondary schools should instead find other, more effective ways to adapt instruction to the needs of heterogeneous classes. However, Skolverket (2009) views ability grouping as acceptable as long as a student's placement is temporary and his/her knowledge assessed continually, but prefer other more inclusive solutions.

What could be the reason for this seemingly frequent use of ability grouping despite research arguing against it? Björklund, Fredriksson, Gustafsson and Öckert (as cited in Ramberg, 2016, p. 691) claim that a positive attitude towards ability grouping, which many teachers have, results from the belief that the formation of more homogeneous groups eases the teaching situation. Furthermore, it has been found that teachers’ attitudes towards ability grouping “are influenced by the type of groupings adopted in the school where they work, the subject that they teach, their experience and qualifications” (Hallam & Ireson, 2003, p.3).
2.3 Multilevel classes

Determining what constitutes a multilevel class is not easy, according to Hess (2001); since no learner is exactly the same in terms of for example proficiency, aptitude and learning style, all classes could be described as being multilevel. For Hess a multilevel class has been created on the basis of age, irrespective of the students' level of proficiency or ability as learners.

While Hess recognizes that there are challenges to teaching a multilevel class, she also finds that there are many advantages. One of them is that students are able to help each other out, which is a huge asset indeed in a large class with only one teacher (Hess, 2001). In accordance with the well-known Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory about learning by Vygotsky (in Strandberg, 2006), there is great potential in a mix of students since less able students can accomplish more with support from more advanced ones. Another advantage with many different students is that they can contribute with many different aspects, such as opinions and experiences, resulting in an interesting learning environment (Al-Subaiei, 2017; Hess, 2001) something that the curriculum Lgr 11 (Skolverket 2011), too, describes as an advantage.

A huge challenge for a teacher in a multilevel group is to find a level of instruction that is not too challenging for the students that are on a more basic level and that still manages to keep the interest of the more advanced learners (Bell, 2001). For what happens to learning if the level of instruction does not fit the individual student? Motivation is often said to be the engine of learning (Stensmo, 2008). It has been confirmed, among other things, that students' motivation is partly dependent on classrooms as places they enjoy coming to because the subject content is interesting and relevant to their age and level of ability, and because the learning objectives are perceived as challenging (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

A recent study sought to investigate the challenges related to mixed-ability classes and the strategies employed by English teachers to overcome them (Al-Subaiei, 2017). The author concluded that “teachers who have a positive attitude towards the diversity in terms of student abilities are more successful in the teaching of mixed-ability classes” (2017, p. 186). The importance of this positive attitude towards student diversity is something which Tomlinson (1999) also has expressed.

2.4 Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated Instruction is a teaching strategy designed to suit the classroom of today, with its diverse learners. Tomlinson (2001), one of its advocators, describes it as a philosophy of
teaching where instruction is planned from the start with students' differences in mind, i.e. a type of teaching that “provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively” (p.1). Students are thereby given a chance to find their individual way among the different approaches that are applied to these three major components in teaching: content (what we want students to learn), process (how we want students to go about learning/making sense of the content) and product (how students are able to show what they have learnt) (Sheehan, 2011; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

It is important for teachers to “begin where students are and build upon the knowledge that students differ” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 2). Differentiated Instruction is considered, among other things, as being proactive rather than reactive. In a non-differentiated instructional setting, a lesson plan might be altered as a reaction when students’ signal that it is needed, whereas a proactive setting has a plan suited for different learners already from the start (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson et al., 2003).

Tomlinson (2001) wants to oppose the belief of many teachers that they achieve differentiated instruction when they ask “some students more complex questions in a discussion or to share advanced information on a topic, grade some students a little harder or easier on an assignment in response to students’ perceived ability and effort, or let students select which questions to answer or skip on a test” (p. 6). Rather, this “tailoring”, as Tomlinson calls it, is a step in the right direction and something that shows teachers’ awareness in the matter, but is not considered enough and also not the most effective method. According to her, “trying to stretch a garment that is far too small or attempting to tuck and gather a garment that is far too large is likely to be less effective than getting clothes that are the right fit at a given time” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 6).

Another issue in Differentiated Instruction is that student work is better measured in terms of quality rather than in terms of quantity. Tomlinson (2001) claims that “[a]justing the quantity of an assignment will generally be less effective than adjusting the nature of the assignment to match student needs” (p. 4). In addition, Tomlinson suggests that there is a risk that advanced students that are given more work to do experience this as a form of punishment.

2.5 Changing classroom practice

As Tomlinson (1999) and Tornberg (2009) describe it, the way a teacher teaches is not only
influenced by their understanding of what learning is, but also to a certain extent by students’ and parents’ expectations and views of what good instruction is and how a teacher should go about teaching. Similarly, O’Brien and Guiney (2001) explain this complexity by saying that “teaching does not take place within a vacuum” (p. 5) and that there are many social as well as political factors influencing classroom practice.

When introducing changes to teaching routines one has to have both students and their parents on board in order for the new approaches to be successful, according to Tomlinson (2001). O’Brien and Guiney (2001) also note that most teachers with increasing experience will continue to develop their professional skills, whereas some may not, possibly due to an inability to break free from traditions and to rethink their role as a teacher (Tomlinson, 2001). Teachers that cease to develop will continue to apply the same methods irrespective of students' learning needs (O'Brien & Guiney, 2001), whereas “[e]ffective teachers look at the new innovations in education and use the strategies they recognize as having potential to help their students succeed” (Burns, 2005, p. 136).

Dixon, Yssel, McConnell and Hardin (2014) acknowledge that “differentiation is a complex process, in that students are doing different tasks based on a central concept” and that “it relies on strong and skillful teachers to plan and implement different levels of the same concept at the same time” (p. 125). In their study, Dixon et al. concluded that teacher efficacy and professional development were crucial in meeting the various needs of individual students. In addition to the already mentioned aspects, teachers' self-reflection and collaboration with other colleagues are also seen as important in regard to change of classroom practice and meeting the needs of students (Stavrou & Koutselini, 2016).

In relation to the above reviewed research conducted within this field, how do the attitudes and experiences of teachers of English in multilevel classes at Swedish secondary schools compare?

3 Method and material

In this section, the method used in the present study is described and some information about the participants is provided.
3.1 Method

3.1.1 Data collection
The method used to collect data was semi-structured interviews, rendering the study qualitative in nature. Since the aim was to investigate in some depth how teachers of English experience the challenge of adapting their instruction to meet their students' differences, this method was deemed suitable for a small-scale study like this (Denscombe, 2009).

Participants were randomly approached in the form of e-mails and phone calls to a number of schools located in Central Sweden. The material was collected by conducting interviews with six teachers of English, who at the time all worked at Swedish secondary schools, and who had agreed to participate in this study.

The interviews were carried out at the schools where the teachers worked, in order for them to feel as comfortable as possible. All interviews were held in English, with an average duration of 43 minutes. The respondents were only given information about the general topic of the study prior to the interview and not provided with the full interview guide in advance. That choice was made consciously, in order not to give the respondents too much preparation time to formulate their answers beforehand, in an attempt to limit the risk of them considering what might be regarded as correct or suitable answers by me.

The interviews were semi-structured, i.e. the questions asked were open-ended, without pre-formulated answers to choose from (as suggested by Denscombe, 2009), and even though an interview guide was used (see Appendix), questions were not always asked in the same order and additional questions were asked when necessary as well (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). To make sure the respondents' answers were interpreted correctly on my part, clarification questions were asked throughout the interviews. The respondents were also given the opportunity at the end of each interview to return to any of the issues addressed and develop their answers further.

The interviews were all recorded (audio only) and some notes were taken during the interviews. After each one, I also wrote down spontaneous thoughts and reflections. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, with the help of the program Express Scribe, to a total of 28,025 words. Together with the notes made during and after each interview, they compose the material on which the result of this study has been based.

3.1.2 Respondents
All teachers participating in this study taught English in year 7-9, worked at different
secondary schools, and had various amounts of teaching experience. Two of them had quite recently started their careers as teachers, while the one with the longest experience had worked for as long as fifteen years within the teaching profession. For the purpose of confidentiality, the informants have all been given fictitious names in the present account. Daniel had worked as an English and Spanish teacher for a year and a half. Peter had the same amount of experience as Daniel, but apart from English he taught Swedish. Anna and Johan taught English and Swedish and they both had eight years of experience in this respect. Magnus taught social science apart from English and had done so for the past twelve years. Lastly, there was Fredrik the most experienced teacher out of the six respondents, who also taught English and social science, and had done so for the past fifteen years.

3.1.3 Data analysis
To start the analysis of the gathered data, the transcribed interviews were printed out and thereafter read several times together with the notes taken during and after each interview. As they were read, answers were annotated and summarized in the margins, and passages that appeared particularly interesting were marked with a highlighter. Responses from all the interviews were subsequently summarized in order to find emerging themes and connections in the data and to identify similarities/differences between the respondents’ answers, as advised by Denscombe (2009). An overview of themes and subthemes that emerged in the data analysis is presented in the results and discussion section (see Table 1).

As previously mentioned the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Therefore the raw data of some of the quotes presented in the results and discussion section have been edited (grammatical mistakes corrected, sound fillers and restarts removed) to better suit the context (cf. Holme & Solvang, 1997). This was done carefully in order not to affect the meaning of the original quote.

3.2 Ethical considerations
When conducting research within the humanities and social sciences, there are four primary ethical requirements, according to Vetenskapsrådet, the Swedish Research Council. They regard information, consent, confidentiality, and usage (Vetenskapsrådet, 2000, my translation). In the present study, these four requirements have been taken into account in the following way: Potential respondents were sent an e-mail informing them of the general topic of the study and asking them to participate. Their consent to participate was interpreted as
given when they actually participated in the interview. At the beginning of each interview (see Appendix) it was stated that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose to terminate their participation at any time. They were also informed that their responses and personal information would be treated confidentially and merely be used for the purpose of this study.

### 3.3 Validity and reliability

Validity is concerned with “whether a method investigates what it purports to investigate” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 327). In this case, validity is related to the way in which the questions used in the interviews correspond to the study's aims and research questions. The tool for collecting data, i.e. the interview guide, was piloted before it was used 'for real'. In order to find out how the questions could be interpreted by a respondent, so that potential misinterpretations due to the formulations of the questions could be avoided beforehand. A few of the questions were subsequently altered. An advantage with interviews, as a method to elicit information, in comparison to for example questionnaires, is that the researcher is present and can make sure that the respondent interprets the questions in the intended way, which will add to the validity of an interview-based study (Denscombe, 2009).

The degree of reliability of a study can according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2008), be measured in terms of “whether a finding can be replicated at other times and by other researchers using the same method” (p. 327). As Stukát (2005) explains, respondents' opinions and experiences of a phenomenon are dynamic and ultimately do not stay the same, a fact that makes it difficult to claim that the same result would be achieved if this study were to be replicated. However, a good explanation of how a study has been conducted, in the way it has been done above, will increase the chances of someone else reaching the same result, provided that the study design remains the same. The inclusion of the interview guide in the appendix is intended to contribute to this aim as well.

### 4 Results and discussion

In this section, the findings from the six conducted interviews are presented and discussed. Firstly, an overview of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis are presented in Table 1.
Table 1. Themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis.

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<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Attitudes towards ability grouping</td>
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<td>Adaptation to individual students’ needs</td>
<td>-Finding suitable material</td>
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<td>and circumstances:</td>
<td>-Teaching aids</td>
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<td>-Challenges</td>
<td>-Advanced students/Less</td>
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<td>-How teachers experience their degree of</td>
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<td>-Newly arrived immigrants</td>
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<td>-How instruction was planned</td>
<td>-Time and other resources</td>
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4.1 Attitudes towards ability grouping

None of the teachers participating in this study taught students that had been grouped together according to ability, but instead taught what Hess (2001) describes as multilevel classes. The teachers’ attitudes towards ability grouping were rather divergent. Both Daniel and Johan were very positive towards this kind of grouping and were of the opinion that it would be preferable to have students that are on a more similar level in a class. Fredrik, on the other hand, was against ability grouping, since he believed that one can easily differentiate within “the normal class” instead. Nevertheless, all of the teachers found advantages with ability grouping, but for most of them the disadvantages with this type of grouping outweighed the advantages.

The advantages the teachers in this study saw were mostly concerned with the more advanced students, and the idea that ability grouping might be beneficial for them. As Anna, expressed it, “these classes must be a pleasure for teachers to have” since one can be very creative in the way one teaches. Another advantage that was put forward by Daniel, Johan and Anna was that creating classes where students are on a more similar level, makes it easier for teachers to find the right level of instruction and to focus and spend time on their students learning needs.

Interestingly enough, research has shown that ability grouping does not have the desired effect on student learning (Skolverket, 2009; Slavin, 1990). Yet there are teachers like Daniel and Johan who have a positive attitude towards ability grouping. According to Björklund et al. (as cited in Ramberg, 2016), this attitude usually stems from the belief that the formation of more homogeneous groups facilitates the teaching situation.

On the other hand, the opinion of most teachers in this study was that ability grouping
would be less beneficial to students that are less advanced since they gain a lot from having more able students in the same class. Peter suggested that the advanced students equally benefit from being in multilevel classes, since he has experienced that students that are more advanced really grow, both as learners and as people, when they help less advanced ones. He explained this not entirely uncomplicated situation as follows: “you gain a lot from having them in one class, but at the same time you have to kind of flatten the level of the teaching” and explained this further by describing that “you can't go really advanced […] and you can't really go lower for those who are weaker; instead you have to be somewhere in the middle”. This is something Carlgren et al. (2006) describe as common at school: a level of instruction where most students in a class are able to keep up well at the expense of students at other levels.

Looking back at the first research question posed at the beginning of this study it can be summarized that the teachers in this study had rather divergent attitudes towards ability grouping. Although this kind of grouping was not adopted by any of the teachers at the time of the interviews, two of them were in favour of the idea whereas the other four were not. Even in the latter group, however, there were those who could see that ability grouping would be advantageous in the sense that it would facilitate the teaching situation. However, maybe it is time that that mind-set changed? After all, a positive attitude towards student diversity has been shown by Al-Subaiei (2017) to influence teachers' possibilities to successfully instruct multilevel classes.

4.2 Adapting to individual students' needs and circumstances

4.2.1 Challenges

All teachers mentioned having classes with a great span of proficiency levels among the students – sometimes spanning from beginners to native speakers – and that this resulted in many challenges. However, most respondents addressed the fact that students in general spend a lot of time with English and that it is a subject where many students are easily motivated to learn.

To adapt to students' needs and circumstances was definitely perceived as a challenge for these teachers, though more for some than for others. Three of the teachers, Daniel, Peter and Anna, pointed out the difficulty in responding to the needs of learners that had recently arrived in Sweden and that had no prior knowledge of English and the implications this had for the class as a whole. They also mentioned the difficulty in finding suitable material that
was on the right proficiency level and yet age appropriate, so that the students would find it interesting.

Sometimes some students influenced the way instructions were given to the whole class. Several teachers mentioned the wish to be able to speak English all the time in class but that they often felt they had to choose their words very carefully and say most things first in English and then the same thing in Swedish. As Anna described the situation in one of her classes: “I realised I can't speak English because then I have four kids who don't know what I'm talking about.”

Peter explained that sometimes students in one and the same class come with needs and circumstances that do not go well together, which makes it impossible to adapt every exercise to suit individual learners.

Anna saw many challenges:

being completely honest, sometimes I actually don't know if I'm helping or not 'cause sometimes I feel that the students who already have a good knowledge of English when they come in the sixth or seventh grade, they will continue having that and those who have problems they will continue having that.

The teachers participating in this study experienced teaching English in multilevel classes at secondary school very differently. For some teachers the students' differences were not a big issue, and they had found a way to teach where students' differences were not hard to adapt to, according to them. A useful tool that seems to have helped the differentiation of instruction for two of the teachers, Fredrik and Magnus, was the computer. Each of their students had his/her own device and could access the many useful sites on the Internet that for example had different levels of listening comprehension and that made it easy to differentiate instruction. For some teachers this teaching aid was missing, at least partly, since students only had access to computers during some lessons.

All but one teacher thought that the advanced students were not a challenge to adapt to. Advanced students were often asked about what they would like to do and encouraged to come up with their own suggestions. Peter described the situation with advanced students as follows:

They are often quite self-reliant as well so you are able to give them quite large and open exercises and they would do it on their own and learn and grow from it, just via feedback, so they don't require help all the time.
Anna also thought that the advanced students were easy to adapt to but that they sometimes made her nervous: “Sometimes I have students who are better in English than I am, and that is always a challenge”.

Daniel felt that the advanced students posed as an equal challenge to adapt instruction to as the weaker students since they also require a lot of time and effort if they are to keep their interest and motivation in the subject.

Some differences among the teachers in terms of the way in which they experienced the challenge of meeting the needs of their students could possibly be seen in the light of their various length of experience. Fredrik and Magnus for example were very confident in their abilities as teachers and why they did what they did. Fredrik explained this with the fact that a few years ago when he started working at his school the teachers who worked there quit and he “had to take control of that institution and then I started working my way up”. He had the golden opportunity to do what he wanted as teachers are not working in a vacuum as O’Brien and Guiney (2001) express it. Colleagues influence the way teachers are able to work, sometimes you have to adjust to teachers already working there when you start and you cannot (for various reasons) teach the way you wish. For instance, Daniel was very positive to ability grouping and really wanted to work in that way but he is new at his job and the colleagues, principal also need to be on board with it to work out. Teachers’ instruction seem to be influenced by and in some cases limited by colleagues, students and their parents and superiors. As Tomlinson (2001) and also O’Brien and Guiney (2001) explain it, teachers’ practice is in many ways influenced by other factors; for example their students’ and their parents’ views on teaching, and it is not always possible to teach according to your own beliefs as instruction is not entirely up to the individual teacher.

4.2.2 How teachers experience their degree of success
The teachers experienced their degree of success when it comes to meeting their students’ needs in very different ways. They will of course experience their success very differently depending on how they interpret, meeting the different needs and circumstances, as declared in the curriculum.

Peter thought that “for the most part I believe I have, sometimes I haven't [been successful]” and believed that “some students would have been able to go further if I had been able to adjust in a better way”. In general, the participating teachers found themselves successful in meeting the students’ needs and circumstances with their instruction. But like Peter, all but one, acknowledged that there was room for further improvement.
In order to better adjust his instruction Peter thought he needed more time:
Adapting and adjusting all exercises, every exercise isn't possible because there isn't time. I do try to have [students’ differences] in mind and I do try to find the time to do it, but I believe that [time] is the single largest factor.

Anna, on the other hand, was of the opinion that teachers always complain that they do not have enough time. She thought that there is enough time in principle, but that she could perhaps use it in a better way: “it's just that you have to decide what to do with it, what is most important”.

For Johan it was important to “focus on doing a variety of things [...] so all the students have a chance [...] to do something they are interested in”. He developed this by explaining that:

If you have a class with twenty students, there are twenty individuals and they have their own way of learning and speaking English [...] and I think that most of the time, us teachers have become better to adapt the teaching for those who need it. I think we do it in such a variety of teachings so I think all students will be given a shot. And if they don't get to learn their own way I think they became better to tell us.

Johan further expressed that he believed that teachers in general can become better at adapting their instruction: “because most of the time we are trying our best, but sometimes I think it is more convenient that everyone does the same thing, so I think we can adapt even more”.

In order to become more successful Magnus would have liked to have access to textbooks and workbooks on one and the same topic but on different levels. He had even contacted publishers of teaching aids to discuss the way these aids were designed since his opinion was that teaching materials for English had not developed over time, in contrast to those for other subjects, and that those relating to English could also be designed in other ways to be more helpful and useful to teachers. Anna would also have liked to have other types of schoolbooks on different levels that could be used for teaching the class as a whole. In addition she wanted access to more resources in terms of support in class from an additional teacher but she felt that “that those are things that I can’t do anything about”.

Some of the teachers drew on experience or lack thereof as a way to explain how they experienced adapting to students' needs and circumstances. Daniel and Magnus expressed that it had definitely become easier with increased experience. Some differences among the
teachers could possibly be seen in the light of their various length of experience. O'Brien and Guiney (2001) also note that most teachers with increasing experience will continue to develop their professional skills and therefore would improve with experience. Fredrik and Magnus who had been teachers for very long, were very sure of their abilities as teachers and why they did what they did.

4.2.3. How instruction was planned

Four teachers described having one main plan for instruction and then an additional side plan to complement it, for students in need of adaptations,

Peter usually had one plan that was adapted “to students who need it” as he put it.
Fredrik worked a lot with themes in 3-4 week periods and used formative assessment quite a lot. He said that “I don't have to do different types of planning” because he explained he had a stated purpose for the set period and then content and process and product could vary, “but they are still working on the same thing, let's say reading comprehension, but according to their needs, their level”.

Daniel and Magnus involved students in choosing the content, thereby it could be differentiated in a natural way. They explained that they used a textbook where chapters were on the same topic but on different levels and that it facilitated differentiation.

It was mostly adaptations to the planning that were done for the class as a whole and where expectations of its outcome were on different levels or the feedback was given on the individual level that were mentioned by the respondents in this study. Fredrik and Magnus had one plan for the whole class in which student variation is planned for from the start and not that the plan was adapted to some individuals in the class as different plans alongside or adapted as work progressed. Fredrik and Magnus are the teachers who most fits the mould for Tomlinson and Imbeau's (2010) description of Differentiated Instruction. For Tomlinson (2001) it is a much more effective way to plan instruction like Magnus and Fredrik did it, with student variation in mind from the start rather than “tailoring” as the other four teachers in the study seemed to do.

Circumstances can also be of an issue when it comes to how teachers experience meeting the needs of students, as Fredrik was an example of. He felt that he had a good opportunity to develop his instruction when all other English teachers left at his school and he had to in his own words, “take charge […] and find his own way” to helping students be successful learners in his subject. Daniel's circumstances were different, he thought that ability grouping would be an excellent idea but that it was a
decision that he felt he had little control over.

To meet different learner needs with her instruction Anna had, in periods, throughout her career worked a lot with different materials in her group. However, this is something that she did not find uncomplicated. She explained that she “had a principal once who talked a lot about having English in separate groups in the classroom […] so they can work on their level, and I tried this but I don't think it is possible, I think it is really hard to do”. She said that working with different materials “is also a problem because English is a subject where you need to speak a lot of English and you need to go through things in the whole group”. Also, she recognized that many less advanced students are not helped that much when handed a material on a different level since “they are the kids who need the most help. It doesn't help them if they have the easier material, if I don't sit with them all the time”.

An adaptation that many of the teachers mentioned was that whereas the exercise/assignment is the same for all, the demands for how it should be carried out is very different depending on the individual student. Adapting the quantity of an assignment was often an adaption that was done but as Anna explained this was not an entirely unproblematic issue: “sometimes if we have a text then I'll say that maybe you just read half of it, but I don't think that is good either because then you miss the end of the text”. Tomlinson (2001) offer a possible solution to this as she claims that it is less effective to adjust the quantity of an assignment and better to adjust the nature of the assignment instead to meet students’ needs as learners.

To have student examples as a means to show students how an assignment can be accomplished on different levels is something that both Johan and Anna mentioned as something they used a lot. They found that having student examples is especially useful for the students that are not so advanced and as Anna explained it, made them realise “that okay […] I don't have to climb a mountain, I could just do this”.

4.3 Concluding discussion

Other people (colleagues, students and their parents), “traditional teaching”, resources as time and teaching aids, the right training and skills, all seemed to influence the teachers’ possibilities of meeting the needs of their students. The teachers were clearly not given the same possibilities to succeed in this matter, since they for example did not have the same resources at hand. As teachers in this study experienced it, access to for example computers
was considered a facilitating tool concerning the matter of adapting instruction, a resource sadly not available to all.

A type of one-size-fits-all teaching, that Tomlinson (1999) calls is, seemed to have been employed by most teachers in the study, where adaptations were done for a number of students “who need it” or along the way when the need for adaptation occurred. One teacher explained that a reason for this was that it is sometimes more convenient that students do the same things. Of course it is probably less time-consuming for a teacher to have students do the same thing but, it could also stem from an uncertainty among teachers in how to organize instruction in another way. Teaching to the middle has been the way for many teachers to practise instruction (Carlgren et al., 2006) and maybe it is hard to change traditional views on teaching, as Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) point out, and see how things can be realized in another way. The lack of the right skills and training has among other things been found to influence teachers’ possibilities to differentiate instruction (Gaitas & Martins, 2017, p. 550), and therefore further in-service training seems to be needed.

Why did some teachers experience meeting the needs of their students less challenging than others? The teachers (Fredrik and Magnus) that were perceived as having a teaching philosophy resembling Tomlinson's (2001) Differentiated Instruction, seemed to experience meeting the needs and circumstances of their students as less of a challenge in comparison to those with a more “traditional” way of teaching. To plan lessons proactively, with student variation in mind from the start, rather than planning for the middle and adjusting things as one goes along seem to avoid some of the challenges that are mentioned where for example students were advised to read half of the text as an adjustment because it was too difficult for the student. Ultimately, this will also be better for the students’ learning, as Lightbown & Spada (2013) maintain that the level needs to be adapted to that of the student for learning to take place. It seems plausible that the challenges some teachers face when teaching multilevel classes could be made fewer or be dealt with more effectively with the use of Differentiated Instruction. Differentiated Instruction also seems to be a philosophy that would suit the teaching of the present curriculum where student inclusion is demanded. With that said, how can more teachers (and therefore also their students) reap the benefits of this teaching philosophy?
5 Conclusion

This study is limited to the views and experiences of six teachers and merely aims to provide a glimpse of how teachers of English in multilevel classes experience the challenge of adapting instruction to students’ needs and circumstances, as they are expected to according to the curriculum, Lgr 11 (Skolverket, 2011). The results thus cannot be generalized. Nonetheless, a few interesting findings became evident in this study that can be of interest when it comes to teaching English and developing successful instruction in multilevel classes.

It became evident that there were many things that were experienced as challenging when it came to adapting instruction to the needs and circumstances of students in multilevel classes, and that these challenges were experienced by the teachers very differently. Looking back at the rather divergent attitudes expressed towards ability grouping most participants could see that ability grouping would be advantageous in the sense that it could facilitate the teaching situation. The teaching philosophy adopted by the teachers seemed to be a crucial factor in determining how challenging the declaration in the curriculum concerning meeting the needs of the individual students with one’s instruction was perceived. The adopted approach also seemed to influence the perception of how successful the teachers felt in doing so. Other important factors were resources such as access to computers and teaching materials and having the right circumstances.

It is my strong belief that teachers want to do their very best in helping their students reach their full potential and that there is an aspiration towards developing instruction; to teach in the best possible and most efficient way. As Skolinspektionen’s (2010, 2011) reports showed that differentiation in terms of instruction was poor in most cases, this type of research is important to continue. Results from studies like this can raise awareness of what is experienced as problematic in adapting instruction to students' different needs as learners to school leaders, authors/publishers of teaching aids and of course teachers. This not only in order to provide teachers with the right resources (for example teaching aids and in-service training) but also to present successful examples to learn and be inspired from. But what good do research and theories do to instruction if they cannot be put to use by teachers? Perhaps a next step could be to make an in-depth study of a teacher's attempt to implement Differentiated Instruction? Alternatively, an action research study helping English teachers at secondary schools in Sweden develop their practice towards a more successful differentiated instruction in multilevel classes?

Finally, since this study's overall focus was on how teachers experienced teaching English
in multilevel classes, it would also be interesting to study teachers in action by doing classroom observations on this same topic.
References


Appendix

Interview Guide

- Make a short presentation of myself and the study.

- Ask permission to record the interview.

- Remind the respondent of the fact that the responses s/he gives in the interview along with any personal information will be treated confidentially and that s/he may choose to terminate his/her participation at any time.

Questions

Warm-up/Background:
- For how many years have you been a teacher/a teacher of English?
- What training do you have?
- Apart from English, do you teach any other subject?

Core questions:
- At your school, how is the English subject organized in terms of grouping? Do you use ability grouping at your school?
- What is your personal opinion of ability grouping?
  - positive aspects?
  - negative aspects?
- How do you experience your role as an English teacher? How about in terms of helping your students to be successful learners in your subject?
  - Are there any specific advantages or challenges as you see it?
- What is your perception of the students' different levels of proficiency? What implications do their different levels of proficiency have for your teaching?
- What does the declaration in the curriculum that “[t]eaching should be adapted to each pupil’s circumstances and needs” mean to you?
  - Is the requirement possible to realize?
  - How is this adaptation visible in your day-to-day practice?
- How do you experience adapting to the needs of your students (advanced learners, struggling learners, students with special needs (for instance dyslexia))?
- How do you plan your instruction in order to meet the needs of individual students?
  - Content (material)
-Process (How the instruction is planned; whole class, groups/pairs, individually, homework, time)
-Product (assessment; tests, summative/formative)

-In your own experience, have you been successful in terms of adapting to students’ different needs and circumstances with your instruction?
-If no: What do you think is needed for you to be able to adapt your instruction more successfully according to the needs of your students?
-What do you think is the key to meeting the different needs of your students?
-Is there something you would like to add or would like to go back to and explain further?