IS TEACHING GA AND RP ENOUGH?

A study of Swedish upper secondary students’ attitudes towards varieties of English and their English education
Abstract

This study focuses on the teaching and learning of English as a second language and how different varieties of English are currently being used in education around the world and in Sweden. The purpose is to examine Swedish upper secondary students’ comprehension of different spoken varieties of English and their attitudes towards these varieties. Additionally, it will be investigated how important the students think exposure to different varieties is, which varieties they feel are important to have encountered, and what they think more generally regarding English language teaching and learning. 92 students in an upper secondary school in Sweden took part in the study. A listening exercise was carried out with follow up questions to test comprehension and examine how easy the students found the speakers to understand and how much they liked the sound of the pronunciation. This was followed by a questionnaire where the students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements about the importance of exposure to different varieties of English in their education. The results showed that the participants understood the speakers well in general, but that English English and American English were considered the easiest to understand and most pleasant to listen to, while Indian English ended up at the other side of the spectrum. Most of the students answered that it is very important for them to be exposed to various varieties of English in their education, and suggestions regarding which varieties to use in class were given. In conclusion, English teaching in Sweden should include more exposure to different Englishes to meet students’ requests.

Key words: English as a second language, English varieties, Sweden, upper secondary school, comprehension, attitudes, exposure
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1 Introduction

After I graduated from upper secondary school in 2000, I moved to Northern Ireland for work. I had good grades in English and considered myself maybe not completely fluent, but a very advanced user of English as a second language. I arrived in Dublin in June and I was picked up by a woman. We sat in her small car driving north and had an informal conversation. I realised very quickly that I had never encountered her variety of English during my twelve years of English studies. There were so many expressions I did not understand. Later in life I moved to Scotland and had a similar experience once again. Now, as a teacher student, I understand that teaching colloquialisms in all English varieties is impossible, but the pronunciation of Northern Irish English and Scottish English was entirely alien to me and that could have been avoided through lesson plans covering different spoken Engishes.

With inspiration not least from my own personal experiences, and with a view to my future career as a teacher, the aim of the present study is to examine current Swedish upper secondary students’ comprehension levels of different varieties of English and the students’ attitudes regarding those varieties. Additionally, the study will investigate the students’ thoughts regarding their own education and the importance of exposure to different English varieties. I believe that this study will be beneficial, not only to me, but to all other teachers of English in upper secondary schools both in Sweden and internationally. In particular, I would like to address the following research questions:

1. How well do students in one upper secondary school in Sweden understand different English varieties?
2. How important do the students think it is to be exposed to different varieties of English in their education?
3. What are the students’ attitudes towards different varieties of English in terms of pronunciation?

2 Background

The world is metaphorically shrinking. Globalisation has brought us closer together than ever and by doing so made English even more of a lingua franca. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is “a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different
first languages” (Seidlhofer, 2005:339). In the following sections, teaching English as a second language will be examined from three perspectives: the current situation in the world, possible future situations in the world, and the historical and current situation in Sweden. Previous research will be summarized with international and Swedish examples.

2.1 Varieties of English — what is being taught and learnt?

If we argue that Standard English is the normally expected variety for English teachers to teach and students to learn, we face a problem as there is no universally agreed definition of the term *standard* (Farrell & Martin, 2009). Trudgill even claims that Standard English is not even “a language”, it is “less than a language”, since it is simply one part of English and not English itself. Standard English is linked to written English, the language used in teaching and learning materials, and what is regarded to be the language used by “educated people” (Trudgill, 1999:118).

Yilmaz and Özkan claim that within the so-called inner circle, a term introduced by Kachru and referring to the countries where “Most people have English as first language” (Melchers & Shaw, 2011:8), there are varieties which provide a norm for the language. The authors list America, England and Australia as three examples (2016:1933). For many English teachers in Europe the goal of their language teaching is to provide “near-native proficiency and consistency in BrE [British English] or American English (AmE)” (Modiano, 2003:35). While this goal has become less pronounced over the years, it still contributes to undervaluing other English varieties within the education systems (Modiano, 2003). In China, a similar approach has existed for years where the acceptable varieties to teach have been American and British English in their standard versions (He & Zhang, 2010:2). Again, however, *standard* is not clearly defined but simply attached to the labels of the traditionally most influential Englishes of the inner circle to add the idea of ‘correctness’.

One problem in this context is that most people who have English as their native language do not speak a standard variety of English, but rather a nonstandard one (Trudgill, 1999:118), for example Cockney English in London and Valleyspeak in California. Also, we hear more and more English spoken by the populations of Kachru’s outer circle and expanding circle. The circles were established by Kachru as groupings of states based on the English usage of the country’s people. The outer circle consists of countries, mostly former British colonies, where people need English inside the country for educational, political, business and legal purposes. In the expanding circle, encompassing the rest of the world, people use English for the same reasons as they do in the outer
circle, but here the language is primarily used with people from outside of one’s own country (Melchers & Shaw, 2011:8). One variety in the expanding circle is Chinese English, which is spoken by the largest ethnic group of learners and users of English in the world (He & Zhang, 2010:2). In other words, there is a greater chance for most learners of English to meet non-standard and even non-native varieties of English in their everyday lives than to meet the standardised Englishes of most educational materials.

McArthur (2004) uses the expressions “English as an international language” and “World Standard English”, which emphasise the next step in teaching English as a foreign language, namely, to include more than just one or two geographically defined varieties. As a matter of fact, English as an international language (EIL) is a label often used for the English taught today (see e.g. Sharifian, 2009; Sifakis, 2004). McArthur (2004) focuses on grammar taught in Singapore and how, perhaps, teachers need to reign in on corrections and let the learners’ language develop organically. Surely this idea can be applied to all essential components of English teaching. The exposure to English which we see today, not least in expanding circle countries such as Sweden, is different from what it has been.

2.2 Varieties of English — what could be taught and learnt?

To be able to communicate with others is probably the main reason for learning another language and English is no exception. However, apart from learning the actual language it has also become necessary to gain “intercultural awareness” to make the communication successful (Yilmaz & Özkan, 2016). The idea of learning for meetings with real people, and for the future in an international world, has become more important and therefore students’ education needs to change accordingly in order to prepare them better (Bieswanger, 2008:44; Farrell & Martin, 2009:7). Galloway and Rose sum it up well when they write that there are “calls to increase students’ exposure to the diversity of English in order to better equip them to use ELF in a variety of contexts” (2014:386). The significance of native English is being questioned and there is more emphasis on the diversity of English as a part of English education. Interest in the pedagogy side of such changes to learning is increasing and Galloway & Rose suggest four points for consideration:

- more exposure to the diversity of English
- more value placed on learners' multilingualism
• increased exposure to ELF communication
• the development of communication strategies to help students use ELF with an aim of mutual intelligibility and mutual understanding (Galloway & Rose, 2014:387)

Exposure to different varieties in English teaching is advocated by many. Sung (2014) suggests that such exposure should occur rather later in a learner’s education in order not to cause confusion regarding the student’s own pronunciation of the target language. Other authors do not take up the time aspect, i.e. when to begin teaching other Englishes, but simply state that teachers should “consider all varieties of English, not just British Standard English or American Standard English” (Farrell & Martin 2009:7) and that “students should encounter as many varieties as possible” (Bieswanger 2008:44). The emphasis here is on reception rather than production, i.e. to raise awareness and tolerance of different varieties instead of forcing anyone to speak in a way they do not prefer. Such an approach may also increase comprehension of other accents to some extent (Sung, 2014:203).

According to Sung, it is up to the teachers to introduce different varieties as well as the “sociolinguistic reality of English use around the world” (Sung, 2015:100). Sharifian proposes that teachers can promote an understanding of Englishes other than the usual American and British varieties by choosing texts and other materials reflecting a greater diversity (2009:67). The students can thus be exposed to not only the sound of a different variety, but also some of the aspects of the culture with which it is associated. This way of teaching has been termed English as an intercultural language (EIcL) by Sifakis (2004), and it encompasses English varieties from Kachru’s outer and expanding circles (Melchers & Shaw, 2011), in addition to native ones. He makes several suggestions to consider when teaching English in this way, but concludes: “Ultimately, the best resource of genuine EIcL material are EIcL learners themselves, and in particular those who have been exposed to real-life EIcL situations and tasks” (Sifakis, 2004:248).

One last concept to be introduced at this point is Euro-English, referring to English as a lingua franca in Europe, as a consequence of a “Europeanisation process” (Modiano, 2003:37). There is an ongoing discussion about the potential of European languages to add to English. Modiano uses certain expressions translated from Swedish as examples that could make English stronger, e.g. he is blue eyed, in the sense of a person being naïve and seeing
the world with ‘blue eyes’. “With enough exposure and acceptance such constructions could conceivably become a part of the core of Euro-English” (2003:39).

2.3 Varieties of English — what has been taught and learnt in Sweden?

Sweden is one of the most developed countries in the world when it comes to English ability (Ringbom, 2012). In a proficiency test carried out in 2017, more than 1.3 million people from 88 countries and regions took part and completed the “EF Standard English Test” (EF, 2018:44). The test results ranked Sweden as the country with the highest English proficiency level (2018:6). Ringbom suggests that one reason for this could be that Sweden is a relatively small country where the inhabitants understand how important it is to know English. Another reason might be that Swedish and English are closely related, which makes it easier for Swedish speakers to learn English than for speakers of most other languages. A third reason can be the constant exposure to mostly American and British English through subtitled (rather than dubbed) series and movies on TV (2012:491). Whatever the reasons are for individual Swedes to learn English well, it can be established that English is a big part of our culture and has been so for some time. Bolton and Meierkord mention that “from the 1950s to the present, English has been enthusiastically learnt and used by an ever-increasing proportion of the population” (2013:94). They also remark on the increasing use of English as a “teaching medium” in schools in Sweden (2013:95).

The curriculum for upper secondary school published in 1963 provided detailed information about which variety of English should be taught and learnt. Over the three years of school students should be tested on American English and study English and American literature, though regarding pronunciation the norm to follow was Received Pronunciation (RP). The students should receive some orientation regarding American English (GA), but this should not be practiced (Ecklesiastikdepartementet, 1963:107-108). In the following curriculum from 1970 there were no references to a specific variety of English anymore when it comes to teaching or learning; as a matter of fact, English does not have a chapter of its own, and the aims and main contents of the subject are specified under Modern Languages. However, the students gaining knowledge regarding the language area’s culture and society is mentioned (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1983). The same goal is cited in the curriculum applying between 1994 and 2010. Here, we also find additional information about varieties of English and what the students should show understanding of at the end of the upper secondary English course.
Although no detail is provided, the expression “language with a regional tinge” (Skolverket, 2018, my translation) is used and broadens the range of varieties of English included in the education.

In the most recent curriculum for upper secondary schools in Sweden (Lgy11), it says: “Teaching of English should aim at helping students to develop knowledge of language and the surrounding world so that they have the ability, desire and confidence to use English in different situations and for different purposes” (Skolverket, 2011:1). This is in line with what has been discussed previously, namely the study of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as an intercultural language (EIcL). Furthermore, about students’ reception skills it is written, regarding the first of the upper secondary English courses, English 5: “Teaching in the course should cover the following core content: […] Spoken language, also with different social and dialect features” (Skolverket, 2011:3). The social features are in fact a new addition to the teaching content. Although there are no instructions regarding what Englishes the students should be exposed to, there is a related point in the core content of what teachers should cover during the course: “Living conditions, attitudes, values and traditions, as well as social, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. The spread of English and its position in the world” (Skolverket, 2011:3). This ought to make teachers include different English-speaking countries in their planning and, by doing so, perhaps the English varieties of the countries as well.

The changes across the Swedish curricula tend to be towards a more diverse English exposure with features from less frequently considered areas of the inner circle and maybe even the outer and expanding circles as well. Research has been carried out with a focus on teachers’ and students’ attitudes towards different Englishes in Sweden and elsewhere, which can provide input to the development of future education systems both in Sweden and internationally.

### 2.4 Previous research

This section will be divided into two parts describing research based on surveys and interviews with teachers and learners, first in an international context, and then more specifically in Sweden.
2.4.1 **International**

Yilmaz and Özkan carried out a study in Turkey where both English teachers and students learning English were involved. The aim was to get a perception of these two groups’ attitudes towards “ownership of English and cultural integration in English language teaching” (2016:1951). The results showed, firstly, that both instructors and students shared the idea that it is important to teach and learn about cultures from different parts of the English-speaking world (2016:1951). Although this finding is not specifically about language varieties, it illustrates an understanding of English as something not only found in one or two first-world countries, but all over the world, and is therefore worth mentioning. Secondly, most of the informants expressed positive thoughts regarding different English varieties and the cultures in which they are spoken, even though these ‘other’ varieties were not something they wanted to use themselves. In a similar study by He and Zhang (2010), already referred to above, Chinese students were asked about their favourite variety of English in the classroom. Standard English was the preferred language for teaching and learning in the classroom regarding all skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), but the students’ own China English was also a somewhat accepted pronunciation variety (2010:784).

Another study paying attention to the learners and their feelings regarding exposure to different varieties of English was conducted by Sung (2014) in Hong Kong, though the focus was not on the students’ own pronunciation there. Then again, some respondents mentioned exposure to non-native English as something which could affect the learners’ pronunciation in a negative way. The overall attitudes towards Englishes outside of the norm were divided. On one hand, the respondents understood that being exposed to different varieties of the language could be valuable, but that this should happen in a classroom situation was not considered necessary. In other words, learning about many varieties was welcomed in theory, but in practice it was deemed unnecessary (Sung, 2014:200-202). The participants were “aware of the possibility of encountering multiple accents of English given the plurality of English”, but wanted to have one “single instructional model for learning English” (2014:201).

Galloway and Rose (2014) also carried out research, in Japan, from the viewpoint of English learners. The 102 university students who took part in their study were all given the task of using a “listening journal”. Once a week the students listened to a variety of English of their choice and wrote down comments regarding, e.g., the grammar and pronunciation, together
with the reason why they had chosen that variety. This served as a “pedagogical tool and a research instrument” and “provided a way for students to self-direct their own learning, and an opportunity to increase their exposure to the diversity of English” (2014:389). The results of the study showed that the listening journals made the students interested in English varieties and they enjoyed the exercise; however, they did not reflect on how the task could help them develop strategies in their interactions with other English speakers. Often the students chose varieties with which they were unfamiliar, because they were regarded “difficult” (2014:391). The exercise also showed that the students “brought their own stereotypes and prejudices to the surface. However, the end-of-course interviews indicated that prolonged exposure over the semester caused reflection on, and re-evaluation of, these stereotypes” (2014:394), i.e. more exposure creates more acceptance. The authors suggest that when using this tool in the future, regardless of its usefulness in exposing students to different varieties, teachers should “place more focus on ELF interactions and less on the notion of varieties of English” (2014:393-394), i.e. although a listening journal is helpful, attention should remain on communication between users of English as a lingua franca.

Sung’s (2014) approach, focusing on English teaching from the learners’ perspective, in combination with a version of Galloway and Rose’s (2014) listening journals, was used in the present study.

2.4.2 Sweden

Not a lot of research has been done in the field of learners’ perspectives on English teaching in Sweden, but teachers’ views on English teaching using different varieties have been investigated, and students’ opinions to some degree.

Ainasoja (2010) included 20 teachers at an upper secondary school who participated in a survey about their attitudes towards American English, British English and Mid-Atlantic English. The writer’s aim was to determine which English variety the teachers used and why they used that specific variety. Also, questions regarding their thoughts on different varieties in the classroom were asked. The result was that nearly all the teachers thought about introducing different varieties of English in their classrooms. The reason for this was mainly to help students communicate more easily with other speakers of English in the world. Concerning the varieties to choose, the teachers’ answers included no actual examples,
because it all depended on the students’ interests, their plans and the countries they would visit (Ainasoja, 2010).

Ainasoja also asked her informants if they were given any directions from their “school/school system” (2010:31) concerning which varieties of English they should choose. All but one answered that they did not receive any guidelines from the school system. It was already pointed out in section 2.3 that there are no specific instructions in Lgy11 when it comes to the choice of English in the classroom, but Ainasoja’s study made it clear that the investigated school had not developed any guiding principles either. Neither national nor local regulations regarding English varieties used for, at least, exposure in English class exist in Sweden, it seems.

Another study involving teachers, but this time also students, looked at attitudes and thoughts about English teaching in another upper secondary school. Svensson wanted to focus on whether correct native English was the desired variety at the school, or if a more “global communicative perspective” had been implemented (2015:16). His chosen method was a survey and he collected data from 258 students and nine teachers. Regarding the students’ actual usage of English in their everyday lives, Svensson asked the students to finish the sentence “I use English mainly when…” with one of the following options: on the Internet, on vacation or speaking to foreigners in Sweden. 71% of the informants said that they primarily communicated in English over the internet, which arguably highlights frequent usage of and exposure to English among Swedish students today in a forum other than the classroom. Svensson sees this outcome as a fact that the teachers did not deviate from their known path and did not change English activities to meet the students’ needs, for example by utilizing the internet in their education. He also concludes that “much of the English teaching seems to remain basically the same” and that “Traditional attitudes of the teachers are less in line with the students’ own reality of using English” (Svensson, 2015:35). Other sources of English varieties could potentially be the start of something new.

How easy it is to understand American English, British English and Swedish English was also investigated by Svensson. The students were asked to rank the three varieties in order of comprehensibility (there were no recordings played at the time of the survey). American English was claimed to be the easiest to understand while, interestingly, Swedish English was
the variety most frequently marked as the least intelligible (2015:22). Results regarding the comprehension of supplementary varieties of English would have been exciting to see and it could also have shown if Swedish English was ranked low perhaps due to it being the only non-native English. Also, a follow up question asking the students for their input on which Englishes they would like to be exposed to could have added insight into attitudes and wishes regarding their education. The lack of these aspects in Svensson’s study and a curiosity to hear more from the students influenced the choice of method and materials for my own study.

3 Method and material

This study was conducted at an upper secondary school in a medium-sized town in Sweden. A quantitative method was used to collect data.

3.1 Material

The data was collected in two parts: a listening comprehension activity involving different varieties of English with follow up questions, and a questionnaire with statements and open-ended questions.

3.1.1 Listening comprehension and answer sheet

In a pilot study made by me, where 46 upper secondary students aged 15-19 participated, it was revealed that many of the students did not know what various English varieties of the inner circle sounded like. Therefore, a listening exercise was designed for this study to give the students prior knowledge, when necessary, regarding the Englishes in question.

I chose eight clips from YouTube where eight different varieties of English were spoken: English English, American English, Irish English, Scottish English, South African English, Welsh English, Australian English and Indian English. The varieties were picked based on all of them, except for Indian English, being from the inner circle. Indian English was chosen because it is an Asian English variety which, I believe, the students may encounter more often, for example on TV, than other varieties of English from other continents. The clips were all of men in their 20’s and 30’s who spoke about different topics. Some of the speakers were famous while others were not. Based on the first minute of each clip I wrote two comprehension questions about what the speakers talked about. The questions were answered by either understanding the meaning of the conversations or by filling in a gap with the exact
words used by the speakers. I was aware that by using these two kinds of questions, the easiness of answering the questions could be somewhat uneven. However, my idea was that the answers would focus on some typical linguistic features in the pronunciation of each variety. Further discussion regarding the clips and questions used in the listening exercise is covered in 3.5.

For each clip, the answer sheet to be completed by the participating students contained the two comprehension questions plus two additional questions regarding a) easiness to understand the speaker, and b) the students’ attitude towards the variety in question. 5-point Likert scales were added to the last questions for the students to give their opinion: “How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)” and “Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)”. See Appendix 1 for more details.

### 3.1.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of eight statements, one for each of the varieties used in the listening comprehension activity: “I think it is important to be exposed to ___ in my education.” Each statement came with a 5-point Likert scale where the students were to rate how important they thought it was to be exposed to each variety: 1=I completely disagree, 2=I somewhat disagree, 3=I neither agree nor disagree, 4=I somewhat agree, 5=I completely agree. Furthermore, there was one statement about exposure to different accents in school in general, where the students used the same Likert scale and answer alternatives as above, and two open-ended questions. The students had the opportunity to explain why or why not education involving different varieties was important to them, and if they had any suggestions regarding English teaching and the use of English varieties in connection with that. See Appendix 2 for more details

### 3.2 Participants

92 students of mixed ethnicity, aged 15-20, at an upper secondary school in Sweden were asked to take part. The selection process did not include any specific criteria, only that the participants were currently enrolled in the courses English 5 and English 6. All 92 informants participated in both the listening comprehension activity and the survey, though not everyone answered every question.
3.3 Procedure

The data collection was carried out in the classroom during regular English class. I used a PowerPoint presentation to explain the reason I was there and the setup of my degree project. Before the actual activities started, all students were informed about the principles of research ethics (see 3.4 for further details) and the procedure.

Each student was given the answer sheet accompanying the listening comprehension activity and had the instructions read to them, as seen in Appendix 1. Any questions raised were answered. I strongly emphasised that the participants were to answer the questions individually, and that this was not a test and would not be graded or affect their final grades in English. Some supplementary instructions, not written on the sheet, were given verbally: The students were not to worry about spelling, as it was a listening exercise, and if they did not want to participate in the listening comprehension activity or did not hear the information asked for in the questions, they should leave the answer lines blank. Also, regardless of their ability to answer the two comprehension questions they were asked to at least answer the general questions. How to use the Likert scale was modelled by me on the whiteboard, and the concept was checked with the students to avoid any misunderstandings. We then watched and listened to the clips, which were incorporated in the same PowerPoint presentation I used to introduce myself and my work (see above). Each clip was played twice.

After the listening task was finished, the second questionnaire was introduced and explained. Again, I modelled the procedure of using the Likert scale. The participants were asked to respond to the open-ended questions as well.

The overall information regarding me personally and my study was carried out in Swedish to make sure that everyone felt comfortable with the situation and understood what they were asked to take part in. While none of the questions in the listening exercise answer sheet were translated, the statements regarding the students’ thoughts on exposure to different varieties of English in their education I asked the students to translate into Swedish in front of the whole class, again to avoid misinterpretations.
3.4 Ethical considerations

Before any data was collected from the students, they were informed about the principles of research ethics and asked for their approval to participate. Anonymity and confidentiality (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) were terms explained and assured to the informants and they were told that taking part was voluntary and they could stop participating at any time throughout the process should they wish to do so. No questions were asked in the answer sheet or questionnaire regarding gender, class or school programme, let alone the participant’s name. While the questionnaire did have a question about the student’s age, I later decided to disregard that information in my results.

3.5 Method and material discussion

When creating a test of any sort we need to consider several things, most importantly validity and reliability. For a test to be valid “it measures accurately what it is intended to measure” (Hughes, 2009:26), and for it to be reliable the results should be the same, more or less, regardless of when the test was conducted. However, “we can never have complete trust in any set of test scores. We know that the scores would have been different if the test had been administered on the previous or the following day. This is inevitable, and we must accept it” (Hughes, 2009:36).

In the case of my listening task there were further potential problems to think about. I did not have the possibility to create my own recordings, which meant finding examples online. Although YouTube can function as an archive of English varieties, the videos posted are of different qualities regarding sound and picture, and it may be difficult to find suitable clips. Hughes states that “poor recording introduces difficulties additional to the ones that we want to create” (2009:163). In my selection of speakers, I chose to use only one gender from a restricted age group, men in their 20’s and 30’s, who all spoke relatively clearly, i.e. no broad accents were used. Other possible distractions and complications in and regarding my clips, which I was aware of, could be background noise, the students’ previous knowledge of the speakers, lack of knowledge regarding the topic of the talk, idiolect, vocabulary, and grammatical complexity. All these variables I considered when analysing my data.

The results from the comprehension questions are not completely reliable and I will not draw any firm conclusions from these. However, I deemed it necessary to play the chosen varieties
to the students in order to get as much accurate data in the other parts of my study. Also, the results showed certain tendencies which I will discuss more in section 4.

4 Results and discussion

For this part of my study to be as clear as possible it has been divided into five sections, one for each part of my data collection. The order of varieties in which the results are presented is based on the order I played the clips in the listening exercise. Discussions regarding each section will follow directly after the presentation of the results.

4.1 Listening comprehension and intelligibility — results

As discussed in 3.5 above, the results of the listening comprehension activity cannot be used to draw any strong conclusions due to many different variables. The listening task was mostly used as a tool to expose the students to the varieties I wanted to investigate. However, certain tendencies were shown regarding the students’ understanding, and they give us some information which is interesting to examine, especially together with how the students themselves ranked the intelligibility of each variety. This will be discussed in 4.2.

I have marked the answers from the listening comprehension test as correct, incorrect and blank (see Figure 1). Blank either means that the student did not want to answer, and/or that the student did not understand the speaker at all. The results from the Likert scale questions are presented in Table 1.

The varieties which received the most correct answers to the two comprehension questions were Irish English, South African English, English English and American English. The two questions that most students could answer correctly concerned information given in English English and Indian English (in that order). Scottish English and Australian English both had low results regarding correct answers and high numbers of blank answers.
As can be seen in Table 1, the informants ranked American English as the variety which was easiest to understand overall, with almost 67% of the students answering that it was “very easy” to understand. English English came in second place with 39% of the students considering it “very easy”. The lowest numbers of “very easy” answers were given for Australian English, Scottish English and Indian English. When it comes to Indian English, this is somewhat surprising considering the high number of correct answers for one of the comprehension questions about the clip used as illustration. Irish English and Welsh English have most of their answers on the neutral and positive side of the scale where they are evenly spread between answers 3, 4 and 5. Scottish English, South African English and Indian English were the varieties with the most answers on the not-easy-to-understand end of the spectrum. However, the average scores of 2.8 for Scottish English and Indian English truly show that they are the varieties the students feel are least easy to understand. Worth mentioning is that all the varieties got at least one mark for each of the answer alternatives offered (though only a couple of students found American English hard to understand).
Table 1. Students’ self-perceived understanding of different English varieties (in absolute numbers).\(^1\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blank</th>
<th>1=Not easy at all</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5=Very easy</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.9</td>
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<td>American</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>4.5</td>
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<td>Irish</td>
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<td>South African</td>
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<td>Welsh</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>3.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
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4.2 Listening comprehension and intelligibility — discussion

All varieties apart from Scottish English had at least one comprehension question which more than half of all the participants answered correctly, suggesting that Swedish students seem to understand different spoken Englishes rather well, and perhaps this is because of previous exposure to those varieties. The teachers’ compliance regarding the implementation of different Englishes in their teaching, which Ainasoja (2010) had addressed, might have increased even more over the past eight years. Also, the teachers’ responsibility to include lessons which pay attention to countries of the English-speaking world (Skolverket, 2011) has possibly given students more exposure to different varieties, which has made them more competent when it comes to lesser known Englishes.

Unsurprisingly, American English was regarded the easiest to understand, as Svensson’s (2015) study had shown the same. His study also revealed that the internet was the ‘space’ where his participants used English the most. I want to argue that one of the main usages of the internet today is YouTube, not least for young people. Just like I found my example videos of varieties on YouTube, all other users of the site can find material of interest to them. Even if we are not specifically looking for diversity in spoken English online, we will be exposed to speakers with various accents because it is impossible not to.

\(^1\) Blank answers are not included in the average calculation.
Lastly, an observation concerning Indian English: The students’ answers to one of the comprehension questions were more correct on average than to most of the other questions; still they considered the Indian speaker the hardest to follow. One possibility for this could be that the variety is most unfamiliar to the Swedish students and therefore it automatically became a difficult English for them, exactly like the students in Galloway and Rose’s study felt (2014).

4.3 Students’ attitudes towards different English varieties — results

In Table 2 we see that American English received most ticks for answer alternative 5 in response to the question “Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English?”, with 60% of the students liking the American speaker’s way of speaking “very much”. At the other end of the scale, only two informants out of the 92 marked answer alternative 2 and no one chose the answer “1=Not at all” to the question. English English was given 19 fewer 5’s, but still it was the students’ second choice. The average rating for American English was 4,4 and for English English it was 3,8. In the middle of the spectrum we find Australian English and Irish English, which have a clear majority of votes on the positive side of the scale and high numbers for alternative 3, which meant neither like nor dislike. The two varieties receiving most neutral answers were Irish English and Scottish English. South African English did not obtain many top scores nor bottom scores giving the variety an average mark of 2,9 making it one of two varieties below the neutral point. The lowest ranked variety was Indian English with 72% of the respondents marking the answer 3 or less which gave an average score of 2,5, though it was not the variety which received the least ticks for alternative 5. Noteworthy are also the rather high numbers of blank answers regarding Indian English and Australian English. The five students who did not give an answer for Indian English also left the answer blank for Australian English.
4.4 Students’ attitudes towards different English varieties — discussion

The historically most influential Englishes of the world were the two preferred varieties. As pointed out in 2.3, the Swedish curriculum from the 1960’s only mentioned Received Pronunciation and American English as varieties to be taught and presented to the students. The idea of these two varieties being the focal points of the English language education in Sweden is still valid today (see Ainasoja, 2010; Svensson, 2015). Svensson (2015) determined that the teachers and students in his study accepted the old ways and perhaps the same has happened in the upper secondary school in my study, as well as the previous schools the students had attended before. Exposure to mostly English English and American English creates a feeling of familiarity which may be easier to like than the unknown. In the study by Galloway and Rose (2014), the informants showed similar feelings and also stereotyping of lesser-known varieties, something that changed as the students were exposed to more exotic Englishes. Likewise, Swedish students might change their attitudes towards a broader range of English varieties should they be used more in their education.

Of the varieties included in this study, Indian English is arguably the variety which is the furthest away, both geographically and in terms of its features, from both Swedish English and the two most influential native-English-accent varieties Received Pronunciation and General American, which may be the reason why so many students did not rank it higher. A surprising result was the number of students who gave Indian English a blank answer (only

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**Table 2. Students’ attitudes towards different English varieties (in absolute numbers),**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Blank</th>
<th>1=Not at all</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5=Very much</th>
<th>Average</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scottish</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td>South African</td>
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<tr>
<td>Welsh</td>
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<td>Australian</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 Blank answers are not included in the average calculation.
Australian English had more). We can speculate that it was simply a mistake from the respondents’ side and they forgot to tick the boxes, which were the last two questions of the listening task, though there could also be more to this result. No instructions were given to the students as to what to do if they did not care about the varieties at all, so perhaps this was their way of showing complete indifference towards the matter.

4.5 The importance of exposure to English varieties in education — results

The students’ answers to the statement “Overall, I think it is important to be exposed to different accents of English in my education” showed that the majority completely agreed (See Table 3). Only 10% of the informants disagreed with the statement, either completely or somewhat, and 16% answered “3=I neither agree nor disagree.”. In total 48 participants added detailed reasons why they thought it was important or not important to be exposed to different varieties in school, all but four gave positive answers. The reasons behind the optimistic responses given were to be able to understand many different people, to gain more knowledge of English and its varieties so that we can communicate better, to not be shocked when meeting people who speak with different accents, that it is important to know about different spellings and that it is useful when travelling. To explain their more negative answers, informants mentioned that English in general is boring and that we only need to know American English and English English. See Figure 2 for more details.

Table 3. Students’ agreement regarding the overall importance of exposure to different varieties of English in their education (in absolute numbers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1= Completely disagree</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5= Completely agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The trend of American English and English English being the varieties which the students regard most highly continues in this part of the study, as seen in Table 4. More than half of the participants stated that it is very important for them to be exposed to these two varieties in their education with an average rating of 4.4 for English English and 4.5 for American English. There were, however, a few respondents who thought that exposure to the two varieties was not important at all. For the rest of the varieties used in the study the answers were very spread out, except for Australian English, which received predominantly positive responses. No clear, shared view of which varieties the students thought were important to be exposed to emerged from the result, apart from American English and English English. At the other end of the range, South African English and Indian English got 42% and 45% negative marks, respectively, regarding the statement “I think it is important to be exposed to ___ in my education”, i.e. “1=I completely disagree” and “2=I somewhat disagree”, making them the least important varieties to be exposed to, according to the participating students. There were no blank answers given in this context.

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3 Green bars indicate positive responses, red bars indicate negative responses.
Table 4. Students’ agreement regarding the importance of exposure to different varieties of English in their education (in absolute numbers).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1= Completely disagree</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5= Completely agree</th>
<th>Average</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
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<td>Scottish</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>3.3</td>
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<td>South African</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
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<td>Welsh</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.6 The importance of exposure to English varieties in education — discussion

In the previous research discussed above (e.g. He & Zhang, 2010; Sung, 2014; Yilmaz & Özkan, 2016), the writers have presented results showing students’ positive attitudes towards exposure to many varieties of English, and that the students see the usefulness of encountering different accents as a way to prepare for the future (see 2.4). The Swedish students’ results reflect similar opinions. 55% of the participants in the present study state that it is, overall, very important for them to be exposed to different varieties of English in school for them to be able to communicate better, understand more and get around more easily when travelling the world. Another 19% consider it quite important, 16% of the informants are neutral and, as mentioned above, the final 10% do not think it is important.

The students’ focus is still on American English and English English, but there is a desire to meet other varieties as well. Most of these varieties come from the inner circle and some are geographically rather close to home, i.e. Welsh English, Irish English and Scottish English. Despite the geographical distance between Sweden and Australia, however, Australian English is more important for the students to be exposed to, arguably because of the variety being heard more in Sweden, e.g. on TV (see Ringbom, 2012) and through celebrity actors and actresses. When it comes to South Africa and India, the countries and their English varieties may not be as present in Sweden, and, therefore, a combination of lack of exposure
and the varieties being spoken in more ‘exotic’ parts of the world seem to make them less important to students. This was also a tendency in Galloway and Rose’s study (2014).

4.7 Students’ suggestions for the future

There were 18 students who gave suggestions for the future, and some ideas and requests were expressed. Specific English varieties suggested to be used in the teaching were as follows: Russian English and South American English/Spanish English were mentioned three times each, Mexican English was mentioned twice, and Canadian English, Asian English, Scandinavian English, ‘real’ African English and Swedish English were all proposed once each. Propositions of using English varieties from places with large numbers of English speakers were also put forward by one student and two students said that they wanted to be exposed to all varieties of English.

Two students suggested that different varieties could be taught through movies, literature and songs. Also, something that was very important to two other students was that the variety which they use in class should be accepted no matter which one they chose. For example, using the vocabulary of American English in writing should not be incorrect and, more importantly, if students speak with a certain accent, they should not be told to stop doing so and adopt some other accent.

4.8 Students’ suggestions for the future — discussion

It can be considered positive that seven of the students who gave suggestions showed an awareness of English varieties not only being used in native-English speaking countries, but also in other parts of the world, i.e. the outer circle and the expanding circle (see e.g. Bieswanger, 2008; Melchers & Shaw, 2011; Modiano, 2003). The idea of Russian English and Spanish English being used by large groups of people made the students deem them significant. By listing more obscure varieties they also give an insight into how they see the world developing and that English is being used by more non-native speakers than native speakers as a lingua franca.

In Sung’s study the students liked the idea of being exposed to different varieties, but they did not think it was an essential part of their education (2014). For Swedish learners of English
this way of learning is more appreciated and wanted. A couple of the informants have even thought of how it could be done and with what materials. There appears to be an interest in how other accents of English sound and an eagerness to listen to many of them.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate how well Swedish students in an upper secondary school understood different varieties of English and the students’ attitudes towards these varieties. I also conducted a survey to further examine to what extent the students found it important to be exposed to various varieties of English in their education and if they had any ideas regarding the implementation of more varieties in class. The findings show that the participating students had a good grasp of spoken varieties of English from both the inner and outer circles, though far from everyone could correctly answer the various comprehension questions regarding the recordings with the different varieties, suggesting that there is room for further practice and improvement. In addition, overall, they found being exposed to different English accents in school important. Although American English and English were the varieties regarded as the most important, all the other varieties presented to the informants in this study felt important to some or even the majority. Some of the students even showed acknowledgement of specific varieties from the expanding circle, which suggests that they view English as a lingua franca.

Moving forward, these findings should be used as motivation to treat and practice English as an intercultural language in Swedish upper secondary schools, and as inspiration for teachers to provide adequate teaching models and materials to meet their students’ wishes and needs. Furthermore, the current situation in the world when it comes to English language education, together with the results from the present study, may suggest a possible change to the current national policy documents used in Sweden. For many English varieties to be properly taught and learnt in English education, it may be time for additions to the most recent curriculum for upper secondary schools in Sweden’s list of core contents for all English courses (Skolverket, 2011). In particular, more detail may be required as to which – or which types of – varieties students should be exposed to during their upper secondary school years. English nowadays is so much more than English English and American English, which should be reflected in our curricula and teaching approach. Further research into what students of other levels within the Swedish educational system believe to be important regarding different varieties of English
would be beneficial for teaching and learning English as a second language in Sweden. This would raise additional awareness of what the students want to achieve in their English education. Also, how English teachers in Sweden work with varieties of English, and the teachers’ awareness of suggested teaching methods when teaching English as an intercultural language, would be a proposed additional study.
**YouTube clips list**


References


Appendix 1

Listening exercise - Different varieties of English

You are going to watch eight YouTube clips where different accents of English are spoken. For each clip there are two comprehension questions and two general questions. We will listen to the clips two times. Please try your best to answer all the questions, but don’t worry if you can’t, this is NOT a test.

1. English English – Daniel Radcliffe interview on Radio 1
   - Why can’t Daniel complain?
   - What did the woman give Daniel?

   How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)
   1 2 3 4 5

   Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)
   1 2 3 4 5

2. American English – Leonardo Di Caprio talks about his beard
   - How long did Leonardo have his big beard?
   - What does Leo say? He isn’t growing a big beard, he only wants to have:

   How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)
   1 2 3 4 5

   Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)
   1 2 3 4 5
3. **Irish English – Ardal O’Hanlon talks about what is typical Irish**

- Ardal talks about ordering in a restaurant. What food does he talk about?

- What happened when he was about 18 years old?

How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)

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Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)

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4. **Scottish English – James McAvoy talks about when he made a movie**

- James talks about filming a scene in the movie, what does he need to do in four minutes?

- What does James say is always the way to go when filming?

How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)

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Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)

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5. **South African English – Man talks about the South African accent**

- How is he feeling?

- What does the man say? If you speak Afrikaans, you will understand more about:

  How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)

  □ □ □ □ □
  1 2 3 4 5

  Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)

  □ □ □ □ □
  1 2 3 4 5

6. **Welsh English – Man talks about Cardiff**

- The man says that Cardiff is visited by more than 18 million people:

- What does he say is indoors and outdoors in Cardiff?

  How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)

  □ □ □ □ □
  1 2 3 4 5

  Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)

  □ □ □ □ □
  1 2 3 4 5
7. **Australian English – Chris Hemsworth talks about the watch brand Tag Heuer**

- Chris talks about a man called Niki Lauda. Where did Niki Lauda have the Tag Heuer logo?

_________________________________________________________________

- Chris says something to the person interviewing him. Fill in the blank:

  “You might be on that list ____________.

How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)

□ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5

Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)

□ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5

8. **Indian English – Mahesh Babu talks about not filming**

- How long was his break from work?

_________________________________________________________________

- What does he say he learnt during his break?

_________________________________________________________________

How easy was it to understand the speaker? (1=Not easy at all, 5=Very easy)

□ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5

Did you like the speaker’s way of speaking English? (1=Not at all, 5=Very much)

□ □ □ □ □

1 2 3 4 5
Appendix 2

Questionnaire – Different English Accents

How old are you? __________

Please rate the following statements based on how much you agree or disagree.
1= I completely disagree, 2= I somewhat disagree, 3= I neither agree nor disagree,
4= I somewhat agree, 5= I completely agree.

I think it is important to be exposed to **English** English in my education.

1 2 3 4 5

I think it is important to be exposed to **American** English in my education.

1 2 3 4 5

I think it is important to be exposed to **Irish** English in my education.

1 2 3 4 5

I think it is important to be exposed to **Scottish** English in my education.

1 2 3 4 5

I think it is important to be exposed to **South African** English in my education.

1 2 3 4 5

I think it is important to be exposed to **Welsh** English in my education.

1 2 3 4 5

I think it is important to be exposed to **Australian** English in my education.

1 2 3 4 5

I think it is important to be exposed to **Indian** English in my education.

1 2 3 4 5
And here is a final statement. Again, please rate the statements based on how much you agree or disagree.

1= I completely disagree, 2= I somewhat disagree, 3= I neither agree nor disagree, 4= I somewhat agree, 5= I completely agree.

Below please explain why you answered the way you did.

**Overall,** I think it is important to be exposed to different accents of English in my education.

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</table>

Why/why not?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

Do you have any suggestions regarding English education and different accents? Can you think of other examples of English which could be important to be exposed to?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

Thank you so much for your help!