The Use of English Prepositions in Swedish Schools

A survey study on language transfer effects on Swedish EFL learners in a Swedish upper secondary school

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Abstract

This empirical study investigates how English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Swedish upper secondary schools succeed in their use of English prepositions. EFL learners in Sweden today represent a multitude of nationalities and ethnic groups with many different first languages (L1); therefore, English teaching could be subject to change in order to adapt to the new situation. The study is based on an online survey given to pupils taking “English 7” at upper secondary schools in Stockholm. The study aims to find patterns in how pupils with Swedish as their L1 handle English prepositions and use a control group consisting of pupils with another L1 in a comparative analysis based on language transfer. A teacher of English at the respondents’ school was interviewed to elicit teaching methodology and how they use the language diversity in the classroom when teaching prepositions. Even though it was hypothesised that negative language transfer was a factor, the analysis of the focus group shows that negative language transfer from Swedish did not inhibit the focus group’s ability to choose prepositions compared to the control group in the given context. In contrast, positive transfer from Swedish as an L1 contributed to a substantial increase in success rate. However, no clear connection could be made to teaching methodology as the interviewed teacher did not have any specific method for dealing with prepositions and mainly treated teaching prepositions implicitly. Furthermore, the interviewed teacher did not use language diversity in classroom as a tool for learning.

Keywords

Cross-linguistic influence, SLA, language transfer, prepositions, EFL, English teaching, Swedish school system.
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1. Introduction

With knowledge of how to drive a car the first time one gets to drive a truck, that knowledge will certainly help in understanding how the truck works. Both the gears and the ignition are familiar from previous learning. Some of that knowledge, however, is going to be misleading information in the new learning process; the process of learning is not a straight line from lesser knowledge to full mastery. This kind of learning transfer is also applicable when studying a foreign language. The knowledge gained from one language system will be applicable when learning a new language; however, some patterns brought will be false in the new context. Thus, some knowledge will result in positive or negative language transfer. Such language transfer will be studied in this paper.

Swedish and English are both Indo-European languages belonging to the Germanic branch. That relationship entails certain similarities and makes English relatively familiar for Swedish EFL learners in the learning process; nevertheless, there are still problematic areas. Differences in language production entail different cognitive processes, specific for production in that specific language and use of a similar system might not be possible in the new context (Dich & Pedersen, 2013). However, languages that are closely related (e.g. English and Swedish) might still provide opportunities for learners to acquire proficiency in the target language (TL) as patterns and knowledge of language conventions often overlap (Dich & Pedersen, 2013). This makes learning of similar languages complex as some patterns are translatable, whereas some are not. The linguistic patterns shared by Swedish and English provide a platform for learning that, for example, logographic traditional Chinese mainly non-alphabetic writing system, or Greek word order being subject – object – verb (SOV), do not. Similarities in patterns and previous language knowledge are central for this paper and are used in analysing the results.

On the other hand, where similar languages differ, the L1 might also affect the learning outcome negatively. In a comparison of the languages in focus in this paper, English is known to have components that Swedish lacks, such as the inflection third person -s, which complicates applying Swedish language patterns on the TL. Another example of a difficult area to master for Swedish EFL learners is the word class prepositions as they
often either differ in usage, or differ in meaning. For instance, the Swedish preposition för is not always the equivalent of for, as the similarity could falsely imply. It can also translate into, for example, to in a similar construction. Differences like these are solved by learners by inserting a borrowed lexical item from the L1 when not knowing the patterns for the TL and thus making an error based on transfer.

Another factor to consider is how language influence from pupils’ L1s respectively is applicable in the classroom situation in Swedish schools, as it is changing to include more nationalities and more languages and, thus, greater diversity. A recently published article states that results in the “Programme for International Student Assessment” (PISA) is affected by immigration of pupils with diverse L1s to an increasing extent, primarily in reading comprehension; therefore, actions to curb the decreasing results must be taken (Skolverket, 2016). People from various nations and cultures immigrate and thus create more diverse groups of pupils; consequently, as all these individuals bring their own background, perspective and L1 into the Swedish educational system, overall diversity increases and new challenges in teaching arise. Thus, pupils have different possibilities, and challenges, when learning English prepositions in the Swedish school context depending on their language background.

Traditionally, studies and publications have stated that non-native speakers of English generally have problems with prepositions (Brorström, 1987; Estling Vannestål, 2007; Gvarishvili, 2013; Jarvis & Odlin, 2000). Those difficulties have been shown to differ depending on L1, and on what knowledge an individual brings into the study of the English language in a new language context. Furthermore, previous research aimed at EFL learners’ use of prepositions have been carried out on students at university level; for example, a study at Stockholm University indicated that L1 influence does indeed affect selection of preposition at the specified level of perceived proficiency (Ström, 2014). The study was, however, aimed at advanced students of English at university, where students chose to study English. In contrast, pupils in upper secondary school have rarely been focused on. All respondents of the present study take the optional course “English 7”, for which the syllabus states no explicit requirement that any word classes should be given extra attention; on the contrary, instructions for teaching are broad and focus on overall production and reception of English (Skolverket, 2011). That leaves
teaching of specific word classes to the teacher of each class; thus, teaching choices will differ among individual teachers and problems with producing prepositional meaning will likely remain a problem unless addressed earlier in the schooling.

This study intends to investigate pupils’ choice of prepositions in the context of a Swedish upper secondary school, and apply a perspective based on cross-linguistic influences (henceforth CLI), more specifically transfer of various kinds, on the data acquired from a web-based survey. The focus of the study is how pupils with Swedish as their L1 choose prepositions in several provided contexts, and analyse how pupils with another L1 succeed in comparison. Results could provide information whether the area needs more specific instruction, if different language backgrounds affect success rate, and on what types of language influence Swedish has on prepositional choice. To improve teaching of a problematic word class, knowledge on what problems occur in the specific context of Swedish upper secondary schools could help teachers choose teaching methods in the multi ethnic classroom that we see in all Swedish schools today. The multitude of languages in a classroom could then be an asset in striving for the ultimate purpose of making the overall teaching more successful and pedagogically justified.

2. Background

This section will introduce definitions and terminology used in the paper; furthermore, previous research carried out in the fields of second language acquisition and transfer in relation to prepositions will be introduced. The background provided here will also be used in the discussion section when relating it to the findings of this study.

2.1 Cross-linguistic influences & second language acquisition

Previous research in the field of CLI with focus on language transfer for EFL learners has been carried out by comparing specific languages. The common basis applied in most research made is that every language has its own patterns and structures, which may or may not overlap between languages. Such patterns are then applied by a second language learner when approaching the TL in order to develop his/her proficiency (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Usage of patterns and rules from one language when learning another is
known as language transfer and can take the form of negative or positive transfer when brought from previous language knowledge.

Transfer can be divided into subcategories and has previously been investigated on different levels of language including the phonetic, lexical and morphological (Gass, 1979; Gvarishvili, 2013; Jarvis & Odlin, 2000). Ringbom (1992, p. 87) defines transfer as “the influence of L1-based elements and L1-based procedures in understanding and producing L2 text”. Jarvis & Odlin (2000) specify the definition of language transfer, which is used when surveying production of prepositional meaning in this paper, as positive transfer consisting of similarities between languages that could make an EFL learner more successful when using patterns from their L1 in learning the TL. In contrast, negative language transfer has been defined as similarities between languages that make learners produce errors due to patterns taken from their L1.

The positive and negative transfer and their subcategories make up a taxonomy that provide further information on what type of transfer is occurring. A taxonomy of language transfer has been argued to be redundant when introducing a task to respondents, as learners use any previous knowledge when interacting with the TL, no matter the type of transfer (Selinker & Gass, 1992). Similarly, Gvarishvili (2013) points out that even though languages more similar will be subject to more transfer, learners are unaware of the phenomenon until explicitly taught, which in turn indicates that teachers are responsible for the control of transfer. Gvarishvili’s claims are supported by Ringbom (1992) as he argues that languages more closely related will lead to L1 grammatical systems and lexical properties being used to facilitate the TL in attempts to create meaning. Even though respondents in this study do not receive any information on what is being measured in the questionnaire, a taxonomy of transfer specifying the different types of transfer measured is relevant for this paper as a tool for identifying what type of transfer is taking place. It is also important for the comparison made in the analysis. Since the languages studied are similar in structure, pupils will presumably rely on patterns from the L1 when learning the TL. Thus, three different types of transfer are tested in this paper, divided on two types of negative and one positive.
In the process of second language acquisition (SLA), a learner develops an idiolect, an interlanguage. The interlanguage that is created works as a bridge towards the new language but may, indeed, be affected by language transfer (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Even though SLA learners have been shown to overgeneralize and simplify language by using patterns from another language, the transfer that may occur is not solely negative and seen as a hindrance. As James (2007) points out, language transfer is an important factor when shaping the interlanguage. The speaker then uses the interlanguage learned, and revises it with all new knowledge about the TL to develop and reach a higher grade of proficiency in the TL (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Previous research in SLA has also shown that there is a distinction to be made between comprehension and production in an L2. Ringbom (1992) argues that an EFL learner normally understands and comprehends a substantial number of words, but when that knowledge is to be used, learners are less successful. This suggests that even though one might understand a word in context, it is more difficult to use it without the scaffolding provided by the context. This is also applicable on prepositions specifically since they are easy to comprehend but difficult to produce. In this paper, pupils are only tested on production; the contexts presented to give the sentence meaning are rather simple. Therefore, one of the more difficult areas of the L2 is tested while comprehension of easy sentence constructions is presumed by the course level of all the respondents in this study.

Another important parameter to discuss when approaching EFL learners in the present study is age. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), genetically predetermined programming determines to what extent a young learner can be successful in a language, and consequently hinders an adult learner to acquire native-like proficiency (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This is closely related to generative grammar, proposed by for instance Chomsky, in which it is argued that language is tied to a genetic language faculty and separated from non-linguistic cognitive abilities (Croft & Cruse, 2004). Even though CPH is hard to prove, or disprove, the hypothesis has carried some weight by authorities like Chomsky. Similarly, less recent studies have indicated CPH to be true, and that it affects foreign language acquisition among adolescents (Lenneberg, 1967). However, this view has received criticism as several more recent studies have shown CPH to be of less importance when learning a foreign language (Geeraerts & Cuypckens, 2007;
Notions such as this have also been disputed by recent progress in cognitive linguistics where a functionalist view on language learning is prioritized over the formalist point of view. According to this view, language is based on function; it is not created from using a set form onto which words are applied. Research made in this field emphasize language as a social phenomenon and that language, and language acquisition, comes from meaning in context, rather than an internal, genetic language faculty (Geeraerts & Cuyckens, 2007). The benefit of learning a language early may vary depending on what linguistic level is researched (e.g. pronunciation likely benefit more than lexical or grammatical knowledge). No respondents of the present study have learnt English as early as the CPH require in order to gain native-language proficiency, but overall proficiency level (specified and expected by the course “English 7”) is prioritized over age in the present study.

2.2 Prepositions

In addition to the CLI when learning prepositions in English, the difficulties for EFL learners has also been attributed to the polysemy of English prepositions (Wijaya, 2014). Wijaya (2014) specifies the polysemy of prepositions in stating that the same short word can describe both interaction and relation with physical objects as well as abstract domains such as time and circumstance (See table 1). Consequently, CLI in the present study is described as a specific language’s use of, or lack of, prepositions in context that differ between the L1 and the TL. Such similarities and differences of languages are factors of CLI that has been researched on many languages in relation to English and which produce different answers depending on the L1 providing the potential transfer.

Numerous studies comparing first languages’ relation to English have been made. In a study of Dutch EFL learners, it has been shown that students at higher proficiency level who have been exposed to the TL had no problems with frequent prepositions. The less frequent prepositions were, however, influenced by similarities from their L1 and showed signs of transfer (Lowie & Verspoor, 2004). Furthermore, a study by Ringbom (1992) on Finnish speakers of English has shown that speakers of a language less closely related to English produce more errors in preposition choice. This has been argued to be both due to lack of similarities of patterns and structure of language, and to a lack of equivalent prepositional structures, which causes problems in terms of CLI. One differing pattern is,
for instance, that postpositions are more common than prepositions in Finnish (Ringbom, 1992). Also, translatable equivalents of English prepositions seldom exist in Finnish as prepositional meaning is represented in other ways (Swan & Smith, 2001).

In addition, a study on language transfer from Georgian to English showed that EFL learners replaced English prepositions with the postposition existing in the same prepositional constructions in their L1 (Gvarishvili, 2013). This indicates that transfer is a factor in any language when attempting to learn another; moreover, it also shows that it is a more significant factor in early stages of acquisition, before the right patterns are learned. Similarly, English prepositions have been shown to be problematic to learn for EFL learners in a Swedish context (Brorström, 1987; Estling Vannestål, 2007). One such example is the highly frequent Swedish preposition i, which in English could translate to several different prepositions depending on context. This leads to mistakes exemplified by Swan & Smith (2001) as *the floor in the house and *go in school. In addition to L1 influences, selection of preposition is also affected by EFL learning context and the learners’ exposure to English (Håkansson, 2003).

Lastly, a study made by Köhlmyr (2003) has shown that prepositions is the area where Swedish 16-year-olds produce most errors based on transfer. One reason showed is that the perceived semantic equivalent for a preposition is chosen in all uses. This is tied to the fact that when a learner fails to recognize the correct usage for a lexical item, they commonly apply a Swedish usage of the perceived equivalent and gives a literal translation. Köhlmyr (2003, pp. 251ff.) lists several possible transfer mistakes made by Swedish EFL learners based on the first choice of translation in dictionaries and textbooks. The examples provided helped in the creation of questions for this study. Some of her findings on this matter are summarized in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swedish preposition</th>
<th>Literal translation</th>
<th>Examples of other possible choices</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>För</td>
<td>For</td>
<td>To, of, about, by</td>
<td>The article should be written for hand. * (by) I’m sad for that. * (about)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>På</td>
<td>On</td>
<td>At, in, for, with</td>
<td>She had always been good on math. * (with) I hope on success* (for) You should listen on the song* (to)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>In</td>
<td>For, at, with</td>
<td>George is falling in love in Katie* (with) I’ve studied English in three years* (for)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Av</td>
<td>Of</td>
<td>In, from</td>
<td>Bob suffers of bad eye-sight. * (from) He is interested of football* (in)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Examples of prepositions and potential problems experienced by Swedish EFL learners.
The previous research presented above leads to the assumption that even though mistakes will be made in the learning progress, often by applying strategies retrieved from an L1, learners must be made aware of the patterns and structural errors by their teachers. Therefore, the question of teachers’ strategies when teaching prepositions in the given context is relevant to see patterns. Furthermore, patterns in what kind of transfer occurs when Swedish as an L1 is applied to EFL learning is central of the present study.

3. Aim

The aim of this paper is to study EFL learners in an upper secondary school in Stockholm, who have Swedish as their L1, to see in what patterns and to what extent language transfer affects pupils’ choice of prepositions in context. Prepositions have been shown to be a difficult word class to produce correctly for Swedish EFL learners (Brorström, 1987; Estling Vannestål, 2007). Consequently, EFL learners often show negative language transfer in their choice of preposition as they either translate from their L1 or their L1 does not have a preposition in the equivalent sentence construction. Similar to studies carried out on other age-groups, negative language transfer will presumably affect judgement in the cases where pupils with Swedish as their L1 choose the wrong alternative. The control group will provide a comparison and will consist of pupils on the same course level, but who have another L1. Furthermore, positive language transfer is also expected as some prepositional phrases are translatable from Swedish and therefore helps production of the correct one in context, especially at the relatively low level of proficiency at upper secondary schools. The results may then be helpful when teaching in the specific context as they provide information on problematic areas of teaching prepositions and shows what types of errors might be specifically tied to Swedish in a cross-linguistic perspective. The paper will answer these three questions:

- In what ways do language transfer from Swedish affect Swedish EFL learners’ choice of prepositions in the course “English 7”?
- What cross-linguistic patterns are realized in a comparative analysis on pupils with Swedish as their L1 to pupils with other an L1 - not Swedish or English - in successfully using English prepositions?
Does the English teacher of the surveyed pupils use a specific methodology when teaching English prepositions? Is pupils’ L1 considered when teaching a word class that might be susceptible to cross-linguistic influence in form of transfer?

4. Methodology

The overall methodology follows the pattern of “QUAN + qual” proposed by Dörnyei (2007, p. 169), where data is collected concurrently but quantitative data is given dominance over the qualitative data. The research is based on a survey questionnaire (See Appendix A) and a short interview with an English teacher on the respondents’ school, which provides insight on the data provided in the school surveyed. The survey was distributed in the form of a web-based questionnaire to pupils in a Swedish upper secondary school to receive as much information in the limited time available with the respondents. Respondents with Swedish as their L1 constitute the focus group while respondents with another L1 constitute the control group. This will provide information for a comparative analysis showing which difficulties may be due to transfer from L1 and which may be universal. The results of the two groups are tested for statistical significance with a t-test, the result of which is specified in the result section.

Respondents who have lived in an English-speaking country for more than 6 months were excluded from the investigation as exposure might conceal information on language transfer. At the time of this study, all respondents attend the course English 7 in the Swedish school system and most of them, then, are in their 3rd year. The choice of “English 7” was made to test pupils in their final time being in the Swedish school system and, consequently, receive information on which difficulties pupils retain when leaving upper secondary school. A passive consent form was distributed and explained orally before they received the questionnaire (Appendix C). The consent form was written in Swedish to include parents with insufficient language skills in English.

A focus group and a control group were created from the independent variable L1. The extralinguistic independent variables age and perceived sex was also included in the questionnaire as they could provide information for the result (See Appendix B). However, neither gender nor age is included in the analysis due to the limitations of this
study, but might be interesting for further investigation and comparison. As the studied linguistic area is considered difficult in general, a division based on gender is not judged to add to the analysis. Moreover, proficiency is connected to level in the school system and the age of participants is therefore not in focus. Furthermore, other languages learned between the L1 and English were asked for, but excluded from the study, as that could provide yet another layer of analysis ultimately limited by the scope of this study. Hence, the operationalized categories are based on first language and will be analysed and compared quantitatively. The dependent variable expected to change with differing independent variables is transfer. The variants of transfer that are tested are two types of negative and one positive.

### 4.1 Material

The questionnaire consists of 15 sentences, in addition to factual information, and was created to test three different cases of cross-linguistic influence from a Swedish perspective. The number of questions was decided not to over-extend the time available with the pupils as was agreed beforehand. Respondents were asked for their first name only for withdrawing their results should they opt out via the consent form. Before the questionnaire was distributed, it was piloted on 7 individuals of the same age as the focus group; the average time to complete the pilot study was 9 minutes. The piloted questionnaire took the surveyed pupils from 7 to 21 minutes to complete and was administered between March 4th and March 13th 2017. The questions were constructed and organized per the following patterns:

- Out of the fifteen, questions number 1, 2, 3, 9, 11, 12, 13 were constructed to test negative transfer. The prepositional meanings in context do not have one-to-one equivalents in Swedish.
- Questions 5, 8, 10 tests negative transfer as the equivalent sentence structure in Swedish does not use prepositions at all; therefore, translation or influence from Swedish as an L1 is not possible and might inhibit the ability to choose correctly.
- Lastly, questions 4, 6, 7, 14 and 15 test positive language transfer as Swedish speakers can translate and use patterns from their Swedish to choose the correct preposition.

The factual questions included questions on age, perceived gender, first language as well as languages known before studying English as a foreign language (Appendix B).
pupils were given language alternatives based on the 20 most common languages spoken in Sweden 2012 based on a recently published study (Parkvall, 2015).

In order not to influence the respondents’ answers, as well as not giving pupils with Swedish L1 any advantages, neither the equivalent prepositions in Swedish, nor any translations were provided. Furthermore, the prepositions were given in context where one of the answers is correct while the other three were considered wrong. The choice of prepositions was based on them having high frequency. In addition, to consider current usage patterns of each preposition, all correct and incorrect answers were based on frequency and context based searches on “the Corpus of Contemporary American English” (Davies, 2008-). The sentences provided as context are rather simple to comprehend as the purpose was not to test overall proficiency, but use of prepositions exclusively (See Appendix A). The results of the both groups were coded, and the result of the focus group was analysed and compared to the results of the control group. The respondents were given one score for their overall performance on the 15 questions; moreover, they were also given a score on how many correct prepositions in context they provided on the questions testing different negative and positive transfer respectively (Appendix B). A comparison was made on the overall results, as well as results on positive and negative transfer respectively. Lastly, the teacher of the surveyed pupils agreed to a short interview on how prepositions are dealt with in her classes. Questions on how language diversity is used in the classroom and how prepositions as a word class are dealt with in teaching were included in the interview (Appendix D).

Even though the groups were relatively small and of unequal size, which limits the ability to draw generalizable conclusions, some patterns could be realized in the comparison of the two groups’ results.

4.2 Respondents and data selection
All respondents in the focus- and control group met the following selection criteria:
- Respondents study English as a foreign language in the Swedish school system.
- Respondents do not have English as a first language.
- Respondents have not lived in an English-speaking country for more than six months.
- Respondents answered the identical questions 2 and 13 consistently.
Due to time constraints, no proficiency test was made to further ascertain the level of English among the two groups to be comparable; however, all respondents took the course "English 7" which not only entails a certain proficiency level brought receiving a passing grade in “English 6” (or equivalent course abroad), but which is also an optional course which might then include more pupils with a higher ambition in the subject.

The questionnaire was distributed to a total of 69 pupils and resulted in 56 submitted forms. One respondent with English as L1 has been excluded from the study due to the lack of information on language transfer. Furthermore, two respondents lived in English speaking countries for more than 6 months and two respondents provided inconclusive answers (e.g. selecting answer A on all questions and stating they speak all 20 languages provided as alternatives). The respondents will be discussed further in the sections below.

4.2.1 Focus group
All respondents in the focus group are 17-18 years of age and attended an upper secondary school in a suburb to Stockholm. One pupil from the focus group withdrew via the consent form and several declined to participate and/or submit their answers; thus, their results are removed and will not be used in the result section of this study. One pupil had lived in an English-speaking country; however, as her stay was shorter than 6 months, the results are included in the results. Lastly, several results were excluded as they were submitted either incomplete or considered inaccurate. The final focus group consists of 35 pupils with Swedish as their L1. The respondents as individuals are henceforth referred to as F1-35.

4.2.2 Control group
The respondents in the control group were all in ages 17-19 and attends the same upper secondary schools as the pupils in the focus group. Even though several pupils declined to participate in the study when distributing the questionnaire, no pupils opted out via the consent form. 13 out of the 16 respondents in the control group stated that they started learning Swedish before English, which means Swedish is the L2 of the majority; however, language patterns from their L1 could still be present in the learning of English. The final control group consists of 16 pupils with different L1s (see table 2). The respondents as individuals are henceforth referred to as C1-16.
Table 2. First languages included in the control group represented by number of speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Albanian</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Bosnian</th>
<th>Finnish</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Persian</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Turkish</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Ethical issues
No questions asking for sensitive material was included in the questionnaire and questions used in the results were multiple choice; thus, opportunity to include information not relevant to the study, or which might be sensitive, was removed. Furthermore, after consulting the document *Good research practice* provided by Vetenskapsrådet (2011), the decision to anonymize the respondents’ results was made. This was done by collecting only first names when distributing the questionnaire to allow respondents to withdraw from my study should they wish. When withdrawal had been done, no connection to the individual respondents’ results are required as they are representative of a group; also, as this is no longitudinal study requiring only confidentiality, no pairing of results is necessary and thus motivates anonymity. This could also provide answers more honest.

5. Results
This section shows the findings from the survey, as well as the interview. Figure 1 explains positive transfer for the two groups; figure 2 provides information on negative transfer, and figure 3 depicts the overall test score for all respondents. A t-test made on the overall results rejected the null hypothesis (i.e. there is a measurable non-coincidental difference between the results of the two groups) and showed that the focus group succeeded in their choice of preposition more frequently than the control group (p = 0.0393). The t-test was made using the calculator from QuickCalcs (2014). Sections 5.1 and 5.2 will describe the differences more in depth. Results will answer the questions of how Swedish as an L1 affects choice of preposition; what patterns are realized in comparison to the control group; how teachers of the surveyed pupils teach preposition and use language diversity.

5.1 Language transfer
The results indicate that the most significant transfer occurs in positive language transfer from Swedish. The focus group answered the 5 questions testing positive language
transfer with a success rate of 90.2% and a mean result of 4.50. Standard deviation from means (SD) is 0.79. Even though the general success rate is high, a comparison to the control group provides insight into possible reasons being other than the test being too easy. In contrast to the focus group, the control group chose the correct answer in 48.7% of the answers which gives a mean result of 2.44 and an SD of 1.31. In relation to the overall results of the test (see figure 3), this is the most significant difference between the focus and control group as is shown by a t-test producing a p-value of 0.0001.

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1.** Results on the 5 questions testing positive transfer. The results are presented as number of correct answers and proportion of the represented group.

On the other hand, negative transfer from Swedish with the focus group is not statistically significant in comparison to the control group as a t-test gives a p-value of 0.6201 (see figure 2). This indicates that the difference between the groups may be coincidental. The focus group produced the correct preposition in 65.4% of the 10 questions with a mean result of 6.54 and SD of 2.16. The controls succeeded in 68.7% with means being 6.88 correct answers and SD being 2.31.
5.2 The questionnaire

Out of the 15 questions in the questionnaire, the focus group had a total success rate of 73.7% with a mean result of 11.06. The control group provided the correct preposition in 62% of the cases with mean being 9.31. The SD is 3.63 and 2.94 respectively. Therefore, the results indicate that pupils with Swedish as their L1 have greater success in their judgement of prepositions; however, even though the results suggest higher success rate with the focus group, the measured transfer is only present in the positive sense. Consequently, the most significant cross-linguistic pattern was found when testing how positive language transfer guides judgement, and selection of preposition in context; whereas negative transfer in the present study is not statistically significant in comparison to the control group.

Figure 2. Results on the 10 questions testing negative transfer. The results are presented as number of correct answers and proportion of the represented group.

Figure 3. Total results for all 15 questions. Results are presented as number of correct answers and individual proportion to the represented group.
The data presented indicates that positive transfer might have an impact on Swedish EFL learners at the specified level. The control group proved to be less successful in their judgement which may be attributed to them lacking Swedish patterns as a tool for selection. Positive transfer is also what makes the focus group achieve a higher result in general, as negative transfer in the present study showed to be minimal in the comparative analysis. Thus, the results suggest that positive transfer has a bigger impact on production of prepositions in context for the focus group.

5.2.1 Notable answers
An interesting difference between the groups is present in question 9: “Not peanuts! I have always been allergic _____ peanuts.” (see figure 4). The control group, who in most cases started learning Swedish before English, succeeded in choosing the alternative “to” in 68.7% of their answers, whereas the focus group chose “to” in 63.8% of the answers. The interesting result on transfer from Swedish is that 36.2% of the pupils in the focus group chose “against” which is negative transfer in form of the direct translation from the Swedish equivalent; in contrast, no respondents in the control group chose “against”. It is worth noting that this may be due to overall proficiency level; however, as language transfer and interlanguage is a part of the learning process of the TL, negative transfer is present nevertheless. Another answering pattern worth discussing is question 3: “George is falling in love _____ Katie.” (see figure 5). This question could be argued to be excluded from the study due to the high success rate in both groups; yet, it provided interesting comments from the respondents. The focus group chose the alternative “with” in 88.8% of the cases and the controls in 81.3%. Pupils from both groups did, however, provide the comments stating that they learned this by context in movies and/or reading it in books. The abstract and polysemous nature of prepositions make them ideal to be learned in context, and a question like this suggests that even pupils at lower proficiency levels acquire knowledge of prepositional meaning best by experiencing them in context, in this case through media and popular culture.
5.2.2 Comments from respondents

Pupils were able to provide comments after each sentence in the questionnaire and were encouraged to enter any thought that arose; however, comments other than providing secondary answers to cover potential mistakes were rare. Respondent F22 realized the purpose of that question as he/she commented “this is trying to trick me” in connection to “Not peanuts! I have always been allergic _____ peanuts.”, which tests negative transfer. Furthermore, question three proved easy to both groups as it is a well-known phrase and a possible reason (also discussed in 5.2.1) is stated by F13: “I learned this in a movie and books all the time”. Lastly, a notable comment is “when i was smaller i wrote for but i know it is by!” from F30 as it indicates awareness of previous transfer and development in the interlanguage continuum to a more correct use of the preposition in the TL. This is supported by previous research on interlanguage presented in the background section above.
5.3 Teacher interview

The short interview answering the third research question is transcribed in Appendix D. As the teacher stated she felt more comfortable if not recorded, a structured interview was chosen after consulting Dörnyei (2007) who states that such an arrangement must be discussed beforehand and decided. A semi- or unstructured interview would not allow time for all details to be written down. As the qualitative part is dominated by the quantitative data from the survey, answers provided honestly and confidently are prioritized over conducting a semi-structured interview which in turn could have provided more data for analysis. The interviewed teacher stated that besides introducing prepositions as a word class, no specific methodology that differentiates prepositions from other word classes is used. The word class should have been introduced earlier in school and in other languages which introduce them earlier as English I considered a foreign language in the Swedish context. Word classes are given approximately the same space in the classes with the more frequent ones taking up slightly more time. Prepositions are taught implicitly as they do not function by themselves but are most commonly accompanied by for instance a noun or a noun phrase (NP). As prepositions are used in context, they are also best suited to be learned in context, according to the interviewee (and is supported by the pupil comments specified in 5.2.2.). Furthermore, teachers cannot take all L1s in a classroom into consideration when teaching as there could be a great variety of languages present; in addition, to include a language as a tool, the teacher must possess at least basic knowledge of that language.

6. Discussion

This section will provide further discussion on the results divided into two parts. The first will discuss the answers from the questionnaire and what possible implications of transfer could be realized; furthermore, it will also discuss the findings in relation to the research question on how language transfer from Swedish affects choice of preposition, and what cross-linguistic patterns are realized in the comparative analysis. The second part will focus on the teacher interview regarding teaching methodology and consideration of L1 when teaching prepositions. It will also include further reasoning on how the topic of CLI could be implemented in teaching at the surveyed level.
6.1 The questionnaire and language transfer

The questionnaire was created to test different types of transfer and patterns carried over from Swedish. The results for the focus group on negative language transfer differ both from the presumed occurrence, and from previous research in the field as the focus group’s mean result is considered equal to the result of the control group. Thus, the results indicate that negative language transfer is not a hindrance for the EFL learners in the focus group; however, as no overall proficiency test was made on the respondents, it is possible that pupils chose the alternative that instinctively felt right to them which would indicate that the overall proficiency is at a level where the interlanguage has developed past having trouble with negative transfer from their L1. It may also suggest that the control group (in which most respondents learned Swedish before English even though their L1 is another) are influenced by living in a Swedish context and, thus, producing the same mistakes as the focus group.

In contrast to the lack of negative transfer, positive language transfer is clearly present in the results. The focus group of this study performed significantly better than the control group on the questions testing the positive language transfer as defined in the taxonomy of transfer based on definitions by Jarvis & Odlin (2000). These findings point to the focus group being in a process of learning the TL as transfer has previously been shown to be a part of the learning process (Ringbom, 1992). By using the knowledge gained from previous languages, pupils have created an interlanguage that carries influence from both their L1 (and other previously learned languages) and the TL (cf. James, 2007; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The interlanguage may, indeed, also be affected by other factors, such as learning strategies and exposure, but it does act as a tool for reaching higher proficiency nevertheless. It is by developing that interlanguage and correcting any misleading information brought that the learner can increase their proficiency, just as the respondents in the focus group are arguably doing when learning how to use prepositions.

Similar to how Wijaya (2014) argued that problems with prepositions may be due to their polysemous nature, respondents from the focus group showed problems potentially explained by the same reason. The preposition to used in question 9 is commonly used to indicate direction; however, in this context it is to signal a relation between ‘allergic’ and ‘peanuts’; a relation between an adjective and a noun that needs to be learned in context.
This example might of course also be explained by the fact that the Swedish equivalent differs and thus provides another instinctive answer. Further research using more languages with other relations between adjectives and prepositions could provide more information of the reasons behind the respondents’ choice (cf. Ringbom, 1992; Swan & Smith, 2001).

In sum, language transfer is present in most studies made on EFL learners; however, the extent and type of transfer present in the results of this paper differs slightly from previous research. The fact that positive language transfer is higher than negative might suggest that Swedish EFL learners are further along the process of acquiring a higher level of proficiency in the TL due to more frequent similarities between L1 and TL than available to the control group.

### 6.2 Teaching English in Swedish school system

The upper secondary school course “English 7”, the last and most advanced English course in Swedish upper secondary schools, does not specify how to approach word classes. That knowledge is presupposed from earlier courses and relies on steady and standardized development each year. With that in mind, teaching of prepositions specifically is considered as an implicit task, included in other types of language activities in the classroom. This might suggest a lack of suitable methods to teach prepositions.

As both results of this paper and previous research show, a problematic word class could arguably require more explicit teaching even in the higher levels of EFL learning. One method for explicit teaching of prepositions that has been suggested is based on the use of prototype theory. For example, the prototypical meaning of the preposition *on*, could be explained as “contact of an object with a line of surface” (Lorincz & Gordon, 2013, p. 3.). By extending each pupil’s semantic mapping of a specific preposition, the knowledge of each preposition would grow from the prototypical meaning by use of comparison; thus, the understanding of *come on* would be taught later than *on the table*. No matter if teaching if implicit or explicit, the key to learning prepositions is input and exposure of relevant examples.
Results from the study made by Ström (2014) on judgement of prepositional use at university similarly showed choice to be affected by the L1. Thus, such problems are argued to be carried over from upper secondary schools, as is suggested in this study. It is still worth noting that, as has been shown, prepositions are used differently in different contexts and, therefore, might still be treated best combined with other tasks. To learn a preposition without context is to learn the literal meaning; hence, implicit teaching of prepositions in context could benefit future use of that preposition as pupils will be aware of the multiple and polysemous meanings of the same lexical item.

Since all the respondents of this study take the course “English 7”, the result is limited to pupils actively choosing to study English (i.e. English 7 is an optional course). Even though it would be equally interesting to study pupils in the mandatory course “English 6”, this would give another type of result. By studying the last level of English given in the Swedish school system, the results illustrate what difficulties pupils bring from their schooling and into potential university studies. By identifying and analysing those difficulties, teaching could focus more attention to the problematic areas for each group of L1s and preferably increase overall proficiency of English.

With the results of the questionnaire and the teacher interview in mind, transfer could be considered a factor requiring more attention in school. As has been argued above, learners must be made aware of what patterns they bring into the TL in order to correct whatever wrong choices they make. Even though the curriculum does not give instructions to do this in English 7, Gvarishvili’s (2013) argument that transfer is an issue that benefits from explicit teaching at any level is supported by the findings of this paper. Similarly, the results suggest that the teaching of prepositions could benefit from being explicit rather than implicit to make EFL learners aware of the issue. As prepositions have been shown to be more problematic than other word classes, as well as one that is susceptible to transfer, explicit teaching would provide a more equal foundation for each student to build from. The fact that pupils have different L1s should not be a hindrance in a school environment created to suit Swedish learners primarily. Focus on specific patterns that have been shown to affect choice of preposition could then be highlighted in order to help pupils in their production of language.
Lastly, as the teacher interview suggests, an ideal situation would allow any teacher to use the diversity of languages present in the classroom as an advantage when approaching language transfer issues; however, every classroom is unique and such an instruction would be difficult both to give and receive. In addition, the extent of linguistic knowledge needed to utilize each individual language background in a classroom could arguably never be acquired by a single teacher.

7. Conclusion

Positive transfer is shown when learners use patterns and knowledge from their L1 when producing in the TL, whereas negative transfer is when those patterns prove false in the new context. The lack of negative transfer in this study is by no means a final statement; more sentences, contexts and respondents could have been included if a longer scope of time was available. Language transfer has previously been shown to affect pupils’ acquisition of a second language numerous times and in many different areas, and the case of English prepositions learned by Swedish EFL learners in upper secondary schools proves no exception. Even though both negative and positive transfer can be expected when approaching a new language, as was hypothesised in this paper, there are many types that may manifest themselves in different areas of language learning. For learners to know what patterns belong to either the L1 and the TL, they need to be made aware of what those patterns are; thus, teachers could have much to gain from making teaching of prepositions explicit. Teachers are, however, always dependent on curriculum and have limited time with each class which always limits the ability to cover all areas.

A more substantial number of pupils, as well as a coinciding proficiency test, would provide further information for the synchronic reason for the lack of transfer within this group; however, the limitations of time and respondents prevents this study from doing so. Further research could also continue the search for an explicit method to teach prepositions, if there is one. Such research could be of great value to EFL teachers when dealing with a part of language problematic even to L1 speakers. Moreover, due to limitations of availability of pupils and time, the transfer indicated in this study should not be overgeneralized; it may, however, provide further information on how transfer affects individuals in upper secondary schools when striving for higher proficiency.
Future research comparing Swedish and a specific language (e.g. Arabic, which according to my sample is the most common L1 of the control group) on successfully choosing English prepositions could provide a deeper understanding of transfer from Swedish to English specifically. Such a study could be similar to Ringbom’s (1992) study comparing Swedes to Finns, yet provide information on transfer on growing languages in the Swedish context. Finnish and other languages that use other systems for signalling prepositional meaning will, for example, have inherent difficulties with the positioning of the lexical item signalling prepositional use and therefore provide a different set of data to analyse (see Gvarishvili, 2013; Ringbom, 1992).

In conclusion, by conducting this study, some further insight into what areas prove problematic for pupils has been gained; also, the perspective of a teacher is considered in order to create a greater understanding of the school environment. The language diversity could be acknowledged in a class room, even though a teacher can never be expected to use all of them. Language transfer and diversity could, however, be made explicit in teaching, and the knowledge brought to each unique classroom could then be used as a tool for learning, rather than an obstacle to overcome.

8. Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who participated in my study and thus made it possible. I would also like to thank my supervisor Nils-Lennart Johannesson and my dear friends Ali Al-Ansari and Emma Larsson for their valuable input throughout the process of completing this Bachelor thesis. Lastly, I want to thank Malin Andersson for continuously assuring me that everything will be fine.
9. References


Appendix A – Questionnaire

1. I’ll be ready to leave _____ about one hour.
   a. In
   b. At
   c. On
   d. With

2. The article should be written _____ hand.
   a. On
   b. For
   c. By
   d. With

3. George is falling in love _____ Katie.
   a. For
   b. In
   c. With
   d. At

4. She is actually really nice. You should be patient _____ her.
   a. To
   b. For
   c. With
   d. On

5. I love this song. I even know the lyrics _____ heart!
   a. From
   b. By
   c. In
   d. At

6. We must adapt _____ the cold weather in Sweden.
   a. For
   b. To
   c. With
   d. At

7. The criminal was responsible _____ the break-in.
   a. For
   b. In
   c. With
   d. To

8. You and I have absolutely nothing _____ common.
   a. To
   b. In
   c. For
   d. Of

9. Not peanuts! I have always been allergic _____ peanuts.
   a. For
   b. Against
c. At
d. To
10. Karen wants to stay _____ home tonight.
   a. On
   b. At
   c. By
   d. In
    a. With
    b. Of
    c. From
    d. By
12. Katie knew the answer. She had always been good _____ math.
    a. In
    b. On
    c. With
    d. At
13. The text should be written _____ hand.
    a. On
    b. For
    c. By
    d. With
14. Peter read the news _____ the newspaper.
    a. With
    b. By
    c. In
    d. On
15. I love the taste _____ fresh fruit!
    a. Of
    b. On
    c. In
    d. From
### Appendix B – Answer sheet

I identify myself as:

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<th>Control group</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Trans</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I decline to answer</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Languages learned before English (languages with no speakers excluded)

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<th>Control group</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English is my L2</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian/</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegrin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish (for the control</td>
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<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age

<table>
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<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant code</th>
<th>Total score out of 15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F16 (same as F16)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F17</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td>F18</td>
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<tr>
<td>F19</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>F21</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>F34</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F35</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>C3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>C9</td>
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<tr>
<td>C15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information om deltagande i forskarstudie om språkpåverkan i engelskundervisning, vårtermin 2017

Jag heter Björn Johansson och är ämneslärarstudent vid Stockholms universitet med engelska som huvudämne. Just nu håller jag på med en studie om hur elevers tidigare språkkunskaper påverkar hur elever på gymnasiet väljer engelska prepositioner. Detta brev innehåller information om min studie och vad det innebär att delta.

Studiens syfte och genomförande

Studien fokuserar på hur en elevs tidigare språkkunskaper påverkar hur väl engelska prepositioner lärs in. Engelska prepositioner är svåra, och jag vill med denna studie undersöka hur andra språk kan hjälpa elever i inlärningen för att på sikt kunna underlätta undervisning och göra ett svårt ämne mer lättillgängligt för elever. Varje elev ombedes fylla i meningar där prepositioner saknas. Detta utgör grunden för att klargöra vilka mekanismer som styr valet av preposition. Formuläret är testat på jämnåriga och tar ca 10 minuter att göra under lektionstid.

Deltagande

Att delta i studien är frivilligt och även om du deltar kan du när som helst dra dig ur och exkluderas ur resultatet. Att delta i studien innebär att jag kommer använda svaren från mitt frågeformulär, anonymt och konfidentiellt, för att söka samband mellan språk.

Etik och sekretess

Studien följer noga de etiska föreskrifter som gäller för god forskningsled. Allt insamlat material behandlas med största aktsamhet och förvaras på ett säkert sätt. Materialet kommer bara att användas i forskningssyfte och samtliga medverkande elever och lärare, samt skola, kommer att vara anonyma i de sammanhang där studien presenteras och publiceras. Studien genomförs i samarbete med klassens engelsklärare och inkluderas i ordinarie undervisning.

Om du har frågor eller önskar mer information är du välkommen att kontakta mig på mejl bjjo7839@student.su.se

Student

Handledare

Medgivande

Om du önskar att ditt/ditt barns resultat utesluts ur min studie, vänligen fyll i detta formulär och lämna till din engelsklärare, alternativt skicka ett mail direkt till min mail adress: bjjo7839@student.su.se.

______________________________________
Elevens namn

______________________________________
Eleven underskrift

______________________________________
Vårdnadshavares underskrift

______________________________________
Vårdnadshavares namnförttydligande

______________________________________
Ort och datum

31
Appendix D – Teacher interview

The following questions and answers were selected as they carry information to the research questions. The interview was conducted on March 24th and lasted a total of 9 minutes to conduct after a short introduction of the topic, confidentiality and purpose of the study.

Q: No explicit instruction for handling prepositions specifically is given by the curriculum of English 7, but do you have any specific method or approach when teaching prepositions in relation to other word classes?

A: I think teaching works best if students meet the parts of language together rather than isolated. We try to learn language in the way it is used. Most students have some knowledge of how prepositions work from studies in other languages and to learn them in English works best in context.

Q: I understand. That makes sense, with other languages, do you mean their first language?

A: Or other, as long as they know about prepositions when coming here, learning in context is, I think, the best way to learn what preposition is best suited.

Q: So more implicitly, then, when teaching word classes in general? I mean, in context.
A: Yes. I think it is hard to single out prepositions as something specific and learning it out of context. I don’t know if that would give anything to the students. They always appear in context of something else.

Q: Do you, in any way, think about or use all the different languages present in a class room?

A: Do you mean that all students have different first languages?

Q: Yes, exactly.

A: I try to keep everything in English. But sometimes, when a student asks for a translation or an explanation, Swedish can be used. It’s better than leaving it.

Q: I understand.

A: I don’t think it’s is possible to use a language you don’t know so it’s all limited to Swedish and first and foremost, English.