Writing Difficulties in the Swedish ESL-Classroom

How teachers of English deal with students’ writing difficulties

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Abstract

This study covers a research within the area of writing difficulties in the ESL classroom (English as second language). This essay aims to look at teachers’ attitudes towards working with writing difficulties and also how teachers deal with this issue in the classroom. The data for this study was collected through the qualitative method; interviews and observations. The informants who participated in this study are English teachers, working in year 7-9. The observations were conducted during the informants’ lessons. Previous research has also been used in this study in order to establish the teachers’ work within writing. The study shows that the teachers feel that it is challenging to work with students who have writing difficulties, since those students might be unmotivated. However, the informants believe that teachers need to motivate their students to write more, in order to achieve development. Moreover, the study shows that teachers do not use any specific method when working with writing, instead they try to see what the students have difficulties with, and subsequently find solutions based on the individual’s needs.

Keywords
Writing difficulties, English teaching, writing strategies, writing development
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1. Introduction

The number of students with literacy difficulties has risen, and the importance of literacy has become bigger than it was for 20-30 years ago, according to Rygvold, 1999. She claims that there has been increased knowledge within this field in both school and society, and therefore this issue has drawn attention in media, which is today’s largest information transmitter.

English teachers meet different students with different abilities. Some students might have literacy difficulties; reading and writing difficulties, and it is the English teacher’s responsibility to help and guide his/her students. The Swedish National Agency for Education mentions that a teacher should “stimulate, guide and give special support to pupils that have difficulties” (2011:16). Students with writing difficulties often struggle when using different skills, according to Mason, Graham & Harris (2011).

The aim for writing this study was inspired from ESL (English as second language) students’ difficulties. After spending time with English learners, the thought of digging deeper into writing and its difficulties became interesting. For this reason, this study will deal with the teachers’ attitudes towards dealing with writing difficulties in the classroom. Moreover, this essay aims to research the teachers work in the classroom, in furtherance of finding out what methods they use to facilitate and help their students writing. This study will provide an understanding of how teachers work and feel when dealing with writing difficulties in their classroom.

1.1. Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate how English teachers work with their students’ writing difficulties in the classroom, and also what their perceptions towards writing difficulties are. This paper also aims to see how the teachers genuinely deal with this issue during their lessons. The purpose is summarized in the following questions:

- What are the teachers’ perceptions towards dealing with writing difficulties?
- How do the teachers deal with writing difficulties in the classroom?
2. Background

2.1. Theoretical background

If we look at writing difficulties and learning through a sociocultural perspective, one could say that the student’s intellectual development is based on the language use of social interaction (Bråten, 1996). The sociocultural theory is about development and methods within the learning. Säljö (2000) points out that the usage of the scripts (formatting language) is a sociocultural activity since writing is about using techniques and tools. What Säljö (2000) discusses is that when we use the letters to produce a text we use techniques to accomplish that. Therefore, as mentioned previously, when developing our writing skills, we need to use methods in order to learn better and eventually achieve successful writing. Sociocultural activities has to do with second language learners dealing with activities that will enhance their skills, such as using the scripts by different approaches, for example by interaction. Vygotskij, who was the originator of the sociocultural theory meant that a child should be taught based on the child’s needs and conditions (Vygotskij, 1999). The ZPD ‘zone of proximal development’ is an approach where Vygotskij discovered the importance of the child’s development. Through interaction and guidance of an adult a child could achieve development while they are in their learning process. In other words, the guidance of an adult is one of the most prominent factors in this process (Bråten, 1998). This approach is important to bring up when discussing learning, since learning is a process and this approach deals with learning, interaction and guidance. When teaching, those factors should be included, if one looks at learning from a sociocultural perspective. The Vygotskian approach also mentions that a learner is able to perform better in assignments with the help of assistance, were the person is more skilled (Ware, 1994). Vygotskij describes ZPD as:

It is the distances between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotskij, 1978:86).

What Vygotskij discusses is that there are two levels of development. The first level deals with the child’s capacity of dealing with a task individually and independently, and the second level is about whether the child can co-operate with an assistance or not. Development is pointed out in the ZPD; the development of a child together with an adult, in a school setting the adult would be a teacher. The teacher’s responsibility then to guide, but also to teach. Mason, Harris & Graham (2011) discuss the importance of teaching writing to students with writing difficulties, and they claim that teaching writing to students with writing difficulties can be a challenge for teachers. Graham (2006) defines writing difficulties as lack of development in writing. He mentions that students with writing difficulties tend to spend little time in process writing; also those students tend to focus on hand writing, spelling, punctuation and capitalization. These factors affect their performance because they spend more time on correcting than producing.
According to Graham & Harris (1993), cited in Glynn, Wearmouth & Berryman (2006) writing difficulties might affect these factors:

- “Lack of proficiency in text production skills, that is, frequent errors in spelling, the use of upper and lower case, and punctuation;
- Lack of knowledge relating to the subject content of the script to be written, and/or of the conventions and characteristics of different writing genres;
- Lack of effective strategies in planning or revising text” (Graham & Harris, 1993:98)

What Graham & Harris (1993) argue is that there are factors that affect a student’s writing ability, for example that a student does not know how to use strategies to plan written material. These issues need to be dealt with, wherefore Graham (2008) mentions seven steps used for teaching successful writing. He claims that there are approaches to use to enhance the students writing abilities. The way to prevent writing difficulties is to practice. He mentions among other things that a teacher should “Foster students’ interest, enjoyment, and motivation to write” and to “Take advantage of technological writing tools” (Graham, 2008:2)

Students with writing difficulties do not only have problem dealing with spelling and forming letters, but also with “generating ideas” for writing, which often leads up to negative thoughts of the actual writing. Eventually, the negativity of writing affects the student’s learning and this can affect their future studies, such as higher education (Mason et al. 2011). A teacher should not forget to motivate his/her students, since most students reflect on their own abilities. The most effective way according to Björk & Liber (1996) is to motivate the students by letting them write about things that interest them. Writing has to have a meaning, a real audience.

Glynn, Wearmouth & Berryman (2006) mean that through authentic texts, a student will be more engaged and might reach better goals. There are also other methods to use when working with writing development. Rygvold (1999) mentions that students develop their writing skills through experience and practice; for that reason teachers should give the students the ability to do so. In many cases, students with writing difficulties might have different diagnoses and by that the writing difficulty develops and becomes an issue. What Rygvold (1999) discusses is that the reasons behind literacy difficulties could be many, and often connected to both environment and legacy, such as inner issues; linguistic factors, neurological dysfunctions or vision issues.

**Methods used for writing**

There are many different studies within this field, but there are no right methods to use when teaching students with writing difficulties. Stadler (1998) means that the reason behind this is that research within teaching is a complicated field. The teacher’s personality often affects the results of the study, and therefore it is not relative to claim that some method is correct. However, what one can state is that there are several methods to use within writing based on research.

There are many methods, ways, styles and approaches to use when working with writing. According to Mason, Harris & Graham (2011), there are researchers who have studied within this field and have established different strategies for writing which will enrich the students writing ability. ‘Self-Regulated Strategy Development’ is one approach that could be used in the classroom.
This approach has six stages where the students use strategy acquisitions. The strategy acquisitions will help the students to set “goals, monitor performance, self-instruct, and self-reinforce” (Mason, Harris & Graham, 2003:22). There are many strategies that a teacher could use in his/her classroom when working with writing development, which is beneficial for writing development. Strategies have also been stressed in the Swedish national curriculum for the compulsory school (2011), in subjects as English in order to guide students to become more independent and skilled.

2.2.1 Concept 1: Defining Writing Difficulties

Ericson (1999:11) mentions “writing words in correct spelling” when discussing the term writing difficulties. Asmervik, Ogden & Rygvold (1999) describe writing difficulties as a difficulty for the student within writing. The student has often difficulties dealing with “the areas of productivity, complexity and grammar” (Koutsoftas & Gray, 2012:395). The student might not have had the ability to develop within the writing area, to counterbalance within the usage of the written language. The student might face difficulties when forming the letters or when connecting their mind to writing. The term writing difficulties is used when talking about students who do not have the qualifications in order to be able to write in the way that is expected of the student, due to their age. There can be different reasons for having writing difficulties (Asmervik et al. 1999). Dyslexia is one of the many diagnoses, often associated with literacy difficulties (Ericson, 1999). Dyslexia is a very common diagnosis and often connected to writing difficulties. During the 20th century the diagnosis was known as “word blindness” (Stadler, 1994:9). Today, thanks to research one could now state that Dyslexia is a neurological diagnosis that leads to literacy difficulties and affects both reading and writing, since the diagnosis is neurological (Selikowitz, 1998).

Asmervik et al. (1999) point out that writing difficulties are about students having difficulties to write a text on their own. Spelling is also a contention in consideration of that students with writing difficulties tend to write in the same way as the word is pronounced.

Students who have problem with spelling often avoid words that are difficult for them. When writing they choose another word that might not be appropriate for the context, which later affects the students writing, since the student does not develop in the writing process (Graham & Harris, 2006).

2.2.2 Concept 2: Writing Strategies

A Strategy is a help tool one uses to proceed in the process. Here, in this essay the term strategies or writing strategies will be used as a strategy for language learning. Strategies are about what you can do when you are using (here) a language, especially when you are stuck in your process of reading or writing. O’Malley & Chamot (1990) mention some strategies; metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies. These strategies are used for helping students during the writing process. Strategies helps students to become independent and aware of their learning process. There are different help tools to use; for that reason this essay will only focus on writing strategies, since this essay is about teachers work within writing difficulties.

Teachers should present different strategies for their students, in order to help them to develop within language learning. Examples of writing strategies would be; internet, computers, dictionaries or how to plan and write a text. The Swedish national curriculum for the compulsory
school mentions the usage of the strategies in the core content for the “Speaking, writing and discussing – production and interaction” part, for year 7-9:

- Language strategies to understand and be understood when language skills are lacking, such as reformulations, questions and explanations.
- Language strategies to contribute to and actively participate in conversations by taking the initiative in interaction, giving confirmation, putting follow-up questions, taking the initiative to raise new issues and also concluding conversations (Skolverket, 2011:35).

### 2.2.3 Curriculum and syllabus

The Swedish national curriculum for the compulsory school mentions in the core content that students should be working with writing in order to achieve a passing grade (Skolverket, 2011). By working with this during writing lessons the students will learn how to write different texts.

- Language phenomena to clarify vary and enrich communication such as pronunciation, intonation and fixed language expressions, grammatical structures and sentence structures.
- Oral and written narratives, descriptions and instructions.
- Different ways of working on personal communications to vary, clarify, specify and adapt them for different purposes (Skolverket, 2011:35).

To reach the goal of the knowledge requirements, the teacher should be available during his/her classes to guide his/her students. Hedge (2000) points out that students benefit and learn more from tasks that are well planned, particularly if those tasks include strategies. The requirements mentions that a student should be able to produce understandable material, and also be able to “make simple improvements” (Skolverket, 2011:37). Therefore, the students need help tools to use when working, such as strategies. Since the usage of strategies is a requirement in the National Agency for Education, the knowledge requirements includes this in the followings, for the grade “E” at the end of year 9:

In oral and written production, pupils can express themselves simply, understandably and relatively coherently. To clarify and vary their communication, pupils can work on and make simple improvements to their communications. In oral and written interaction in different contexts, pupils can express themselves simply and understandably and also to some extent adapted to purpose, recipient and situation. In addition, pupils can choose and apply basically functional strategies which to some extent solve problems and improve their interaction (Skolverket, 2011:37).
3. Method

The method chosen for this study is a qualitative method, since the aim of this study is based on the teachers’ work within writing difficulties. The teachers’ work refers to tools and methods that could be used when working with writing. To find out how teachers deal with writing difficulties three teachers in the secondary school; 7-9 will be interviewed, and also their lessons will be observed. First, the observations will be completed during English lessons, since I do not want the teachers to know what I will be looking at, specifically. If the teachers are aware of what I am looking for, their lessons might affect the result. The purpose of the observations is to see what methods the teachers use and if there are special methods used for helping students with their writing difficulties.

Qualitative observations are the most appropriate approach to use when a researcher wants to find out something about the teaching. When observing, the observer should focus on what he/she is looking for, since it is easy to lose focus if something happens in the classroom.

The purpose of the interviews is to see how the teachers perceive themselves dealing with writing difficulties, and their attitudes towards this literacy issue. Johansson & Svedner (2010) mention that interviews and the qualitative methods gives the researcher a better view of the informant’s attitudes towards the phenomena. Through qualitative interviews the possibility of finding the answer of how teachers deal with writing difficulties is possible. Structured questions are often used for measuring knowledge, and since this study is not based on the teachers’ knowledge I will be using qualitative questions where I will be prepared to change the question if the teacher cannot answer it. The informants might give different answers since all teachers work in different ways. Hence, there might be concerns when using the qualitative method. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) mention that by interviews the informant has more space for his/her own opinions and thoughts. The questions for the informants might not give an extensive answer, but instead the informant might answer yes or no. Therefore, the interviewer could modify the questions to get a clearer answer (Johansson & Svedner, 2010).

3.1. Informants

For this study, both interviews and observations will be used on the part of getting a clear result; one approach for each research question. The informants work in the secondary school and teach English for 7-9 graders (see table 1).

First, two observations for every teacher were conducted to see how the teachers deal with writing difficulties in the classroom. And the observations where performed during the informants lessons. Two writing lessons per teacher where observed in pursuance of finding out if the teachers were using any methods or if they were presenting any tools for the students to work with. Secondly, the teachers where interviewed in order to find out their attitudes towards dealing with writing difficulties. The interviews took about 1 hour for every informant. The lessons lasted between 50-70 minutes.
Table 1- The informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants:</th>
<th>Sex:</th>
<th>Age:</th>
<th>Linguistic background:</th>
<th>Education:</th>
<th>Experience:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>English &amp; Swedish teacher 1-7</td>
<td>She has been working as a teacher for 13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Swedish &amp; English</td>
<td>English &amp; Swedish teacher 1-7</td>
<td>She has been working as a teacher for 21 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English &amp; Spanish teacher year 6-9 &amp; upper secondary school</td>
<td>He has been working as a teacher for 5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Material

When interviewing the teachers a recorder was used since it is difficult to write down the interviewee answers when one pays attention to the informant. Patel & Davidsson (2003) mean that recorded material is also beneficial since one gets a lot of information, and therefore by recording nothing will be missed. However, there might be more complications when using qualitative studies. Trost (2005) means that when recording the informant’s voices, both gestures and face cannot be captured, and this could be interesting to look at. Sometimes gestures say more than words, especially when one look at attitudes. At this stage, this study will only focus on the teachers answers and work in the classroom. Opened questions were used during the interviews, since the purpose is not to make the teachers feel as if their work will be judged. The questions used for the interviews are structured questions; hence there will be sub questions to use if more information is needed. The intention is to get a lot of information about the teachers’ attitudes towards writing difficulties, if there is possibility to do so. Five introduction questions were used to make the informant comfortable, instead of beginning with the subject immediately. Later ten questions where used to get an understanding of the teacher’s attitudes towards dealing with writing difficulties in the English classroom.

Before beginning an observation, the observer should make an observation manual in order to get a better structure and to facilitate the scripting (Johansson & Svedner, 2010). The manual used for the observations is an example from Johansson & Svedner (2010). An observation manual (see appendix 4) and paper and pen are the only equipment that is going to be used during the observations, since the aim of the observations is to look at the teachers work and not the students.
3.3. Procedure

First, the observations were completed during three teachers’ classes, two writing lessons per teacher in pursuance of getting appropriate information for this study. The methods, tools and approaches that were used in the classroom were highlighted in order to understand better when writing the analysis since there was a lot of things going on. As mentioned before, it was easy to write down when using the observation manual. I was sitting in the end of the classroom, in order to see better and also for the students to focus on the teacher and not on me, since I am a visitor and a new person. After the observations I looked at the manuals and tried to see if the teachers used any equipment and how they worked with writing in the classroom.

The next week, I went back to these schools to make interviews with the teachers. I chose the interviews as the second part, because I did not want the teachers to know what I would be looking at specifically. I recorded the interviews and later I transcribed the answers and highlighted the essential part that would be significant to bring up in my research (see appendix 3). The interviews and observations were recorded and completed in April, 2013. The interviews took place in the schools, in the informants’ offices. The transcriptions were written down the same day as the interviews were made. After analysing I decided what data I would use for the essay, and which information I would not include. The information that was used for the essay are necessary in order to answer my research questions. Likewise, this was beneficial for the analysis part since it was easier to find similarities and patterns.

3.4. Validity and reliability

Both validity and reliability are important when a researcher conducts a study in order to get a real result. These concepts are about measuring the right thing, and also about the quality of the data. The teachers who participated in the observations were aware that I was going to study their work, and that the study was about writing, therefore I needed to observe their writing lessons. However, the teachers did not know exactly what I was going to look at since it might affect the result of the study and the data could not be valid.

When collecting data through observations both time and place could affect the findings (Cohen et al. 2007). Still, that does not mean that the study is not reliable, it still could be (ibid). It is important to use the same method in every interview and observations such as questions and observation scheme to get a reliable result (Johansson & Svedner, 2010). The validity in the interviews is important, especially if the researcher might want to study the informant’s attitudes. Also the questions need to “measure what they claim to measure” in order for the answers to be valid (Cohen et al. 2007:150). To measure reliability in interviews, the researcher should according to Silverman (1997) have same questions for every informant and also for the informant to interpret the question in the same way (Cohen et al. 2007). Therefore, it is important to interview the informant in the language that he/she is most comfortable with. Even though it is easier to look at and compare quantitative research, the qualitative research gathers more information and attitudes which is an appropriate method when looking at attitudes. It is important for the observer to not get “too attached to the group” (Cohen et al. 2007:158). If the observer does, both the validity and reliability may not be valid. Also, as mentioned before, the observer should have the same observation scheme through the whole process, in favour of getting valid data. Triangulation is when the researcher combines different
methods. In this research triangulation was used in order to get more information since a researcher might not want to state something based on one method. Moreover, a researcher could use two approaches to get more information, if needed, for example both interviews and observations.

### 3.5. Ethical considerations

Since this study deals with people, it is important to not in any case infringe the participants in the study, according to Forskningskravet (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002:5). Along with, it is essential to keep the informants, school and students identities private since the aim of this study is not about to point out any school or teachers. The participants in the study must be informed about this, so they have been informed both orally and written. Vetenskapsrådet (2002) mentions “Då bör undersökningsläggas upp så att det är omöjligt för forskaren att identifiera vem som lämnat de insamlade uppgiftarna” (P.11) The participants in this study will therefore be anonymous and named T1, T2 and T3, in order to follow individskyddslagen (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002:5). The informants who are in this study teachers in the compulsory school will be well informed about their participation of this study and the conditions. Furthermore, the informants will be informed about the voluntariness and that they can terminate whenever they desire and the aim of this study which is an example of vetenskapsrådets example number one. The informants will be informed in a written text and also orally, before the interviews will take place, since this is a rule from “informationskravet” (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002:7).

Before publishing this study, the informants will be informed that they are able to look though the study and interviews, if they wish to (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). When the study is finished, all data from the observations and the informants will be ruined, in order to make it impossible for an outsider to get hold of the personal data and information, until then, all data and personal information will be kept safely with initials and shortenings of the original names, according to “Nyttjandekravet” (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002:14).

### 3.6. Methods of analysis

In this section the method of the analysis will be discussed, and also the usage of method will be shown. Interviews were made since the purpose was to find out what the teachers attitudes towards working with writing difficulties. When analysing data that includes interviews, it is possible to use the “cross-case” method, especially when looking at attitudes and thoughts (MacKay, 2006:56). Since the purpose is not to see how each teacher work but to see how teachers work in general. Teachers work in their own way, therefore the aim is not to put a lot of focus on each teacher as individual, but to see if there are similarities, and later back to the introduction of this study; many students have writing difficulties, and as teachers we would like to help them. When analysing the collected data (interviews) it is an advantage to reread the transcriptions and later mark similarities and differences. However, all material was not appropriate for this study, therefore every question from the interviews will not be discussed clearly, but only concluded. The essential parts of the interviews that were necessary for this study were highlighted in order to be able to use them in the study.

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1. Then the survey should be structured so that it is impossible for the researcher to identify who provided the collected data (Author’s translation).
2. The individual protective law (Author’s translation)
The second data for this study are observations conducted during the informants lessons. The purpose of observations in researches is “to gather live data from naturally occurring situations” (Cohen et al. 2006:378), and in this essay to see how teachers deal with writing difficulties.

## Results

### 3.7. Description of material

The data collected and used for this study consists of both interviews and observations that have been transcribed. Three English teachers who work in the secondary school were interviewed. The materials from the interviews are being used to answer my first research question; *what are the teachers’ perceptions of dealing with writing difficulties?* The questions are specific and deal with attitudes and thoughts about writing difficulties in the English classroom.

Secondly, the observations were conducted to answer the second research question; *how do teachers actually deal with this in the classroom?* As for example if the teachers use any methods, such as specific activities or equipment used when teaching writing. The aim by observing was to see if there were any methods and approaches that the teachers used when working with writing in the classroom. Even though all the students did not have difficulties in writing, methods could be beneficial for them, as for example different tools to use when working with writing in English.

### 3.8. Results and Discussion

In this section the data that was collected for this study: both interviews and observations will be analysed. The analysed data will be divided into four sections: *writing difficulties – according to the teachers; teachers dealing with writing difficulties; working with writing development – methods and equipment and interaction between teacher and student*. The sections were chosen when analysing the data, along with the sections are available in order to see the different patterns since writing difficulties is a broad field. The differences and similarities between the teachers’ attitudes towards working with writing difficulties and their work in the classroom will also be shown. The informants will be named T1, T2 and T3, as shown previous in table 1. When three teachers were interviewed there were mostly similarities in their answers. Since the questions dealt with their attitudes towards working with writing difficulties their own opinions and thoughts are shown in the answers and most of them are personal.

#### Defining Writing difficulties

In this section the definition of writing difficulties will be analysed. The teachers were asked in question one “What do you think of when you hear the term writing difficulties?” The teachers’ definitions of writing difficulties are explained based on their own experiences. T1, T2 and T3
responded to the question by saying that they thought of students who struggle when writing and who is not motivated to write. Also, T1, T2 and T3 said that they thought of students who have not had the opportunity to develop within writing. T2 said that she thinks of diagnoses that complicate the learning of the student, which later affects the writing. Asmervik et al. (1999) describe writing difficulties as a difficulty for the student within writing. The teachers have the same thoughts regarding writing difficulties; hence their thoughts regarding writing difficulties are often built based on experience since teachers meet students with different abilities. The student has often problem dealing with “the areas of productivity, complexity and grammar” (Koutsoftas & Gray, 2012:395). It was not possible to observe students with writing difficulties since teachers are not allowed to point out students who have diagnoses or difficulties. However, it was possible to see the teachers’ work regarding writing. T3 said that he thought of students who do not want to do writing assignments because they are aware of their difficulties and they often give up and say that they cannot. T1, T2 and T3 were also asked about what was most difficult for students with writing difficulties to do when writing. The informants mentioned that a big matter was to begin writing. Some students could spend a whole lesson thinking of what to write. T1 said that the teacher could give guidelines, decide different topics that would both help and interest them. Koutsoftas & Gray (2012) discuss productivity as an issue among students with writing difficulties. Productivity is a huge factor within writing difficulties. One might believe that only the spelling is problematic, such as Ericson (1999) mentions, but sometimes the actual production is the main issue. T2 pointed out the difficult parts in writing:

“Often to begin writing and to develop ideas. Some students want to write but they write the words as they are pronounced. Other students do not understand structure of texts. Again, we need to teach them and by practice and right help they will learn”.

What T2 means is that some students have trouble with developing ideas for writing. All students cannot make up a story or decide what to write about within ten minutes. This is also an issue that needs to be dealt with.

Teachers dealing with writing difficulties

When T1, T2 and T3 were asked about how it feels to work with students who have writing difficulties, similar patterns were found. In question three, the teachers responded that they felt it was a challenge to motivate and work with students who had writing difficulties, since they often tend to give up quickly. T1 also said that the best part of dealing with writing difficulties was to see progress and the students’ development. T2 responded in question three:

“To motivate the students is the most challenging part. Some students push me away, and that is a problem, so then I try again until I manage to reach them. Some students do not like to work with strategies, for example to look up words in dictionaries. Then I need to find some other way to work with, something that they might like and this could take time. A teacher must be patient”.
When observing T2’s lesson, different strategies were presented on the whiteboard when working with writing. The teacher had written two assignments to work with when working with writing, the students could either choose to write an ending of a story or revise an existent story. By this the students were able to choose among the assignments, and to work with different skills. The students seemed more motivated to work since they could either do task A or task B. Teacher 1 also mentioned motivation when answering question 3. T1 responded:

“I would say that challenging is not easy and to motivate the students who have writing difficulties. Some students know that they have difficulties and therefore ashamed of showing their work for me or their parents. Even though you tell them that their work is good they compare their work to their classmates, that is what students usually do, they compete their work with each other.”

Since students develop through guidance (Bråten, 1998), it important for the teachers to be able to help his/her students. If a student has difficulties within writing then it is the teacher’s responsibility to help and guide this student by presenting him/her to different tools that the students can use to facilitate their writing.

In question 5 the teachers where asked about why they believe students have writing difficulties. This is an interesting part since the teachers shared their personal opinions. It is important to understand why students have difficulties before one begins helping them.

“I have been thinking of this since I started working but there is no real answer. What I can say with no support from research is that I believe that we are different and we and therefore we have different needs. Some students have had this issue since childhood. I think that students with writing difficulties have not been able to develop within literacy. I cannot blame their teachers, even though they have an impact of their learning (T1).”

“Everything around an individual can affect the student. School, home and the environment is the main reason, I believe. It is difficult to say if you do not discuss a specific student”. Writing must be practiced. You never become a good writer if you do not write. Many students have writing difficulties, and some might have that because of diagnoses and might need extra help from the teacher (T2).

“It depends on what I believe and what research says. Most students who have writing difficulties might have difficulties in other subjects. If we are talking about difficulties when writing in English then we are talking about difficulties within the English language (T3).

Rygvold (2011) points out that the reasons behind literacy difficulties could be connected to both environment and legacy. As the teachers have discussed this in the interviews, patterns could be connected to the student’s environment and daily life. Also, an important aspect is that there are
students with diagnoses; therefore they might face difficulties in spelling and producing. Students with diagnoses often need help from a special teacher who is educated in diagnoses. Students with diagnosis might have Dyslexia (Stadler, 1994) which enables them to write and read without issues, and those students need help from a special teachers, since the teacher is not able to focus on only one student during his/her lesson. When T1, T2 and T3 were asked in question eight about their schools resources for helping students with difficulties they said that the school had special teachers that either helped the students during the English lessons or outside the classroom. T1, T2 and T3 also stressed that they wished there were more resources and time since there are many students who need help, especially when it comes to producing.

**Working with writing development– methods and equipment**

When T1, T2 and T3 were asked about the methods and equipment they used when working with writing, they responded that they try new equipment and methods in order to see what works and what does not. T3 responded that he includes the students in the lessons and that all the students’ do the same task, even if someone has difficulties. He said that he usually makes assignments based on two levels in order to include the students with writing difficulties. T3 also mentions motivation as the key for successful writing. What T3 means is that if the student is not motivated then how will he/she produce and accomplish the assignment. When observing T3’s lessons the students used their computers when writing. The students were writing articles and T3 told his students to use their textbook which had a chapter with information about articles. The students could write about what they wanted, as long as they followed the discussed guidelines.

T2 responded to the question by saying that she motivates the students by showing them that she believes in them. Graham (2008) mentions 7 steps for preventing writing difficulties, and motivation is one important step. T2 talked about using computers during her lessons, she said that the students have their own computers and they enjoy writing by using their computers. T2 claims that she believes that her students work better by using computers, also the students feel more comfortable when using spellcheck on the writing programme. T2 also responded that she presents different strategies when working with task because she wants her students to be comfortable working with strategies since they are important. The Swedish National School Agency (2011) points out strategies in the core content which should be used during English lessons, and also the usage of strategies is a requirement. T2 also stressed the fact that the classroom also must give space for the student to be able to concentrate and work to develop. T1 responded “this is an inclusive school were everyone has the right to be in this classroom and work together”. What she means is that it is the teacher’s responsibility to help and see progress in her/his students work; therefore the teacher should find appropriate methods and strategies to work with. T1 said that she also lets the students work with computers; she works with different strategies and process writing. T1 had dictionaries on her desk and before the students began working she told them that everyone should take one dictionary because they would need it. Some students complained about this and said that they could look up difficult words in online dictionaries, again the teacher told them to use the book version of dictionaries and she said that you could always trust the books. T1 also said that there is no right method to use, but what a teacher should do is to see what the problem is and then try to find solutions by using different methods or equipment that both the student and the teacher can work with. O’Malley & Chamot (1990) mention some strategies; metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies which could be used in order for the students to develop. T1 worked with process writing with her students. On the whiteboard she had
written “revise” and she explained the word to her students and how they should revise their own texts. Together they made a mind map about the term “revise” in order to help the students understand the term better.

Interaction between teacher and student

T1, T2, T3 discussed the relationship between the learner and the assistance. The vygotskian approach mentions that a learner is able to perform better in assignments with the help of assistance (Ware, 1994). The teacher’s role is here important, since the teacher can help the student with his/her difficulties. When discussing resources and special teachers the informants’ responses were personal and interesting to look at.

“We have one special teacher who works 50% with my class in Swedish and English. When she is here she walks around and help the students, but she spends more time helping the students who have difficulties in English. Some of those students who need help meet her once a week and work with for example writing, if they have difficulties with that. Unfortunately it is not possible to give all the students additional help” (T1).

“Since I cannot help everyone we have a special teacher that follows the students who have difficulties. Also, I try to have contact with their guardians since I give them books to read at home or assignments. If you want to be a good writer you need to read a lot that is what I tell them” (T2).

“We have a special teacher who works with different computer programs with the students, but there should be more resources for that. It is important to give the students the right help, and special teachers are educated in special education. As teacher I can help, guide and motivate my students, and of course I spend time helping them in and outside class” (T3).

When observing the teachers lessons T1, T2 and T3 walked around and helped the students with their writing process. T1 spent most of her time with a student since there was no special teacher available. The students raised their hands in her class and she was trying to help everyone. She then interrupted her students and told them to use the dictionary if they wanted to know a word, since she cannot tell them all the words they are looking for. About four students went to her desk and took a dictionaries.

In the classroom of T3 the students worked mostly in groups, which made it easier for the teacher to help the students since he did not have to walk around to every student, but instead they might ask their partner.

The last question deals with what the teacher did to help their students with writing difficulties outside the classroom. T1 said that a teacher should teach the student to take responsibility over homework and assignments. A students with difficulties should feel secure. For that reason a teacher should show that he/she is available if the student need help or talk. She also said that she has good contact with the students’ parents, and in meetings she explains what they can do as parents, and also what they can do together as a team.
4. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to study teachers’ attitudes and work within writing difficulties in the English classroom. Both interviews and observations were conducted since the aim was to answer my research questions, what are the teachers’ attitudes towards dealing with writing difficulties and how do the teachers deal with writing difficulties in the classroom. The findings are both interesting and inspiring since both attitudes and work has been presented in this study. Hence, expectations about finding methods in the classroom were big, but unfortunately difficult to see since the students were working on their computers and only raising their hands when they needed help. Methods and approaches that could be discovered were during the introduction of the lessons; the teachers presented the tasks and equipment that was going to be used. However, the data will now be discussed and the similarities through the sections of the analysis will be concluded.

The informants’ attitudes and way of perceiving writing difficulties were almost the same. The informants all agreed on the fact that writing difficulties has to do with the individuals difficulties and sometimes the reason could be neurological diagnoses or environmental, as Rygvold et al. (2011) also brings up. Selikowitz (1998) mentions diagnoses that affect the literacy, such as dyslexia. The informants also said that writing difficulties also later affects the students’ development in writing, which in an issue. Therefore, the students should get help from the teacher. Mason et al. (2011) states that teaching writing to students with writing difficulties could be a challenge for teachers. The informants mentioned this issue, and they said that it was a challenge to work with writing difficulties and that it was an important issue since writing is important in today’s society. The teachers felt that it was difficult to reach those students, and T2 said that some students pushed her away, which is obviously not easy to deal with. Therefore, the teachers said that they had special educators in their classroom sometimes who helped those students who needed extra help. However, the informants agreed that they would have wanted the special educators to spend more time with the students who had writing difficulties, since they have more education within difficulties. Bråten (1996) mentions that a child could achieve development with the guidance of an adult, which would here correspond to the teacher or special educator.

Asmervik et al (1999) states that students develop their writing skills through experience and practice, so therefore teachers give them writing assignments in order for the students to develop within writing. What the teachers did to work with writing development was to use computers to begin with. The computers had an important role in the classroom, especially when working with writing. Computers were the similar equipment that was used during all the writing lessons, and in the interviews the teachers responded that the computers were used as a tool for writing. The students could use the computers to write and correct their written material through spell-check. Graham (2008) claims that teachers should use technological tools in order to help his/her students develop within writing. When observing, writing strategies were presented to the students, which are in the core content and knowledge requirements of the Swedish National agency of education (2011). T1’s students worked with writing strategies such as process writing were they had to revise their texts carefully according to her instructions. Motivation was also a similar term that the teachers used when talking about their work regarding writing. The teachers mentioned that motivation had a great role in the learning process. T3 said that motivation was the key for successful writing. T3 also let his students chose topics when writing articles. Lieber (1996) mentions that teachers should let their students write about topics that interests them, and that the writing must have
a meaning. By this, the teacher will motivate their students to write and be active.

Moreover, the results of the study show that the teachers do not use any specific method, but the use tools and approaches that they feel comfortable working with, and also that the students can benefit from. First they get to know the students difficulty, and later they deal with the issue. Working with preventing writing difficulties should be dealt with during lessons, and not only used for classes were they have students with disabilities. The informants said that it is important to work with writing in all ways in order to help the students become good writers. If there are students with difficulties then that student should get extra help. It is difficult to say how one gets help since most schools work in different ways, however, the student should get extra help either from the teacher or a special teacher. Since interaction is stressed in the sociocultural approach (Bråten, 1996) it was interesting to see how the teachers helped their students during classes. When working with writing, the students needed help and asked the teachers many questions. One could clearly see that the teachers felt stressed. However, the special teacher was available to help those students who needed extra help, which was helpful for the teachers since they need to focus on all the students.

In conclusion, the findings show that teachers work with finding appropriate solutions in order to help their students with their writing difficulties, and these solutions are based on the individual’s needs. Also, the teachers believe that it is challenging when working with students who have writing difficulties since students with writing difficulties might be unmotivated to produce because they are aware of their difficulties. Later, the teachers mentioned that they believe that a student can get rid of their difficulties by practicing, and also that those students can have the same possibilities in the future, such as higher education. The qualitative method used for this study was appropriate in consideration of the aim, which was to see both the teachers’ work and attitudes towards dealing with writing difficulties in the English classroom. A quantitative method would not give adequate information such as the teachers’ attitudes, which was here true personal thoughts. Before accomplishing this study, findings of specific methods for working with writing difficulties was expected, such as finding exact approaches that was read before beginning. Also, thoughts about seeing in what exact way a teacher would work to help students with writing difficulties. However, it is difficult to see how a teacher work with a student who has writing difficulties since a teacher cannot point out those students who have that issue. What was found through observations was that teachers teaches writing in a way to both help students with writing difficulties, and to prevent forthcoming difficulties of students within writing. In a future study, it would be interesting to do a study on students’ attitudes towards writing in English. Becoming English teachers could benefit from a study based on students’ attitudes, since they might understand students more closely. The becoming teachers would get an understanding of what students think about writing in English; what they find problematic, how they think they learn best and what they prefer to write about.
References


Appendix 1

Interview Questions to the informants:
- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- What education do you have?
- How long have you been working as a teacher?
- Why did you become a teacher?

Questions about writing difficulties:
1. What do you think of when you hear the term “Writing Difficulties”?
   - Based on your own experiences.
2. How does it feel to work with students who have writing difficulties?
3. What is the most challenging part?
4. What is the best part?
   - Could you please mention one example?
5. Why do you think students have writing difficulties?
   - Your experiences
6. What is the most difficult thing for a student with writing difficulties to do, specifically?
   - Your experiences
7. How do you work with students who have writing difficulties in the classroom?
   - Methods, equipment?
8. Are there any resources in this school that you use?
   - Special teachers – if so, how often?
9. Do you believe that a student with writing difficulties has the same abilities in the future as a student with no difficulties/diagnosis?
   - Why do you believe so?
10. What can teachers do to help their students, except for in the classroom?
Appendix 2

Stockholm den 10 april 2013

Hej.

Intervjun kommer att genomföras enskilt under ca 1 timme på er skola. Intervjun kommer även att bandas och resultatet av intervjuelserna kommer att behandlas under studiens gång anonymt. Skolan eller informanternas namn kommer inte belysas i studien. Under observationen kommer jag endast att använda mig utav mina egna anteckningar samt se hur man arbetar med skrivning i klassrummet.

Fins det lärare som passar vore det bra om du har möjlighet att fråga vederbörande om de är positivet inställda till en intervju.

Jag tar gärna emot namn på eventuella lärare via mejl. När namnen är inkomna på lärarna tar jag själv kontakt med dem personligen för eventuell bokning av intervjuel och information om etniska principer.

Om det finns oklarrhet angående detta går det att nå mig via mail.

Tack på förhand för visat intresse!

Med vänliga hälsningar
Omta Zoi Solagha

Xxxxxx@students.su.se
Appendix 3

The data from the interviews that has been used in the analysis

The informants for these interviews are T1: Teacher 1, T2: Teacher 2 and T3: Teacher 3

1. What do you think of when you hear the term ”Writing Difficulties”?

- Based on your own experiences.

T1: I think of students struggling when writing and of diagnoses. Also, I think of students who often work hard without understanding why their text is not good enough!

T2: I think of Dyslexia, ADHD and other common diagnoses that leads to difficulties in writing. Development is a word I think of, as a student hasn’t developed his/her writing skills.

T3: Students with literacy difficulties. Unmotivated students who does not show their work to their parents or teachers because they are embarrassed of their work, which is sad of course but true. I mean students with writing difficulties often know and understand that they have difficulties, and therefore they don’t like doing writing assignments so they start saying things as “I need to go to the bathroom, I cannot write, this is too difficult, I want to sit in the other classroom” etc.

3. What is the most challenging part?

T1: I would say that challenging is not easy and to motivate the students who have writing difficulties. Some students know that they have difficulties and therefore ashamed of showing their work for me or their parents. Even though you tell them that their work is good they compare their work to their classmates, that is what students usually do, they compete their work with each other.

T2: To motivate the students is the most challenging part. Some students push me away, and that is a problem, so then I try again until I manage to reach them. Some students do not like to work with strategies, for example to look up words in dictionaries. Then I need to find some other way to work with, something that they might like and this could take time. A teacher must be patient.

T3: To make the student understand what a difficulty is, and parents that does not want to cooperate. This leads to less motivated students.

5. Why do you think students have writing difficulties?

- Your experiences

T1: I have been thinking of this since I started working but there is no real answer. What I can say with no support from research is that I believe that we are different and we and therefore we have different needs. Some students have had this issue since childhood. I think that students with writing difficulties have not been able to develop within literacy. I cannot blame their teachers, even though they have an impact of their learning.

T2: Everything around an individual can affect the student. School, home and the environment is the main reason, I believe. It is difficult to say if you do not discuss a specific student”. Writing must be
practiced. You never become a good writer if you do not write. Many students have writing difficulties, and some might have that because of diagnoses and might need extra help from the teacher.

T3: It depends on what I believe and what research says. Most students who have writing difficulties might have difficulties in other subjects. If we are talking about difficulties when writing in English then we are talking about difficulties within the English language.

6. What is the most difficult thing for a student with writing difficulties to do, specifically?
   - Your experiences

T1: To be motivated and to believe in themselves which leads to nothing. The students spends the whole lesson staring at the paper or computer… and the teacher or special teacher must there guide the student and give ideas for a topic that would interest them. I mean after all, we know our students, right?

T2: Often to begin writing and to develop ideas. Some students want to write but they write the words as they are pronounced. Other students do not understand structure of texts. Again, we need to teach them and by practice and right help they will learn.

T3: To write, especially longer texts, but writing on the computer facilitates a lot! To begin is also a big issue…I mean from my own experiences as you said.

7. How do you work with students who have writing difficulties in the classroom?
   - Methods, equipment?

T1: There is no right method to use… teachers usually find the issue and then tries different methods such as strategies when writing. The students learn better and their texts become better after revising. Computers are the students’ favourite tool, mine too. This is an inclusive school were everyone has the right to be able to concentrate and work to develop, so we must give space for that.

T2: Computers, I love them! The students think it is more fun and easier to write on the computers when they can use spellcheck. It is interesting how they complain less and work better. I show them that I believe in them, even if it takes time… you can’t give up on them…I can’t. I can’t forget to mention strategies, which we work with… writing strategies for example in process writing.

T3: First of all, I include all the students. I make the same task in two levels in order to include everyone! I do not use any specific method, but I read a lot, which I believe is important for a teacher, I mean to be updated. But I think I work in a way that motivates which is the key for successful writing. If you aren’t motivated you can’t accomplish anything…especially with kids, they are young and they don’t really see the importance of writing sometimes.

8. Are there any resources in this school that you use?
   - Special teachers – if so, how often?
T1: A special teacher who is educated and experienced. She works with my students 50%, during Swedish and English. Some students meet her at her office to talk and work outside the classroom. They work with different computer programmes.

T2: A special teacher who helps the students during two lessons (twice a week) since I can’t help all the students. I believe my students need her more than twice a week.

T3: Yes, we have a new special teacher, but I am not sure whether she has a special education in working with students who have diagnoses. She has regular contact with those students who need extra help, and us teachers. However, she is not available when we need her.

9. What can teachers do to help their students, except for in the classroom?

T1: To take responsibility and I show them that they learn by doing their homework (at home). Later, I giving them assignments of things we have had for homework…suddenly everyone in the classroom shouts, I know this! Then I say: look now that means you did your homework last month! It’s fun, for them and for me!

T2: Have regular contact with the guardians.

T3: Remember that you are a role model, be positive and happy when you walk around in the school and show the students that they can trust you. If you do so – then I believe that they will trust you, both your knowledge and your role as teacher.
# Appendix 4

Observation manual

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