

STUDENTS LEARNING ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE: AN APPLIED LINGUISTICS LEARNING STUDY

Mona Holmqvist, Gunilla Lindgren

Kristianstad University College, Sweden

E-mail: mona.holmqvist@hkr.se; gunillalindgren97455@gmail.com

Abstract

This study involved students from a teacher training programme and classroom teachers during in-service training. These students and teachers were introduced to variation theory and carried out a learning study on English as a Second Language (ESL) that incorporated five research lessons taught in parallel, rather than in a cycle. The participants in the study were five classes from grade level five to upper secondary school, five university students, and two researchers. The aim was to put learning study to test in describing in what ways students (from fifth graders to upper secondary school students) discerned the letter s at the end of a word, and secondly what kind of knowledge about this learning object they were able to develop during instruction. When an s appears as a terminal letter in English, it can be interpreted in at least five different ways: contraction, plural, third person singular, genitive or possessive pronoun. It can also be the final letter of a monomorphemic word (bass) or suffix (-ness). Our study demonstrated how learning study was used to describe how students of different ages interpret the suffix s. A pattern emerged indicating the way knowledge of a phenomenon develops as a consequence of teaching. This pattern was analysed in terms of the structure of the students' native language. The outcome showed how students tried to comprehend a second language by means of the structure of the first. A good example is the pronoun your (dependent possessive form) and yours (independent possessive form). As there is no variation in Swedish between dependent and independent possessives, students associate the two forms with the differences between d- and t- gender. This distinction is made in Swedish (din/ditt) but not in modern English.

Key words: *variation theory, teacher training programme, English as second language, learning study.*

Introduction

Working in collaboration with teacher training students and practicing teachers creates new opportunities for the students to learn about a particular subject and the way students learn. The model employed combines subject-based studies with the study of pedagogy. In this way, teachers gain experience in planning and carrying out classroom instructions based on critical skills students must acquire in a learning situation. This study was implemented by five undergraduate students of English and their teachers. It was done in cooperation with the English Department and the Pedagogy of Learning research project in educational sciences at Kristianstad University College, Sweden. This article is a developed and translated version of a Swedish conference paper from this research project (Holmqvist & Lindgren, 2007) and the students' report of some other results (on item level) of the study in a Swedish course book (Ashori, Hamrin, Holmqvist, Håkansson, Persson & Håkansson, 2007).

The study began by identifying 'critical aspects' of the learning objective, i.e., precisely what it takes to understand a certain phenomenon. Students must be made aware of such critical aspects by means of variation and simultaneity – an assumption based on variation theory (Marton & Booth 1997; Runesson 1999; Holmqvist 2004; Holmqvist ed, 2006; Holmqvist, Gustavsson

& Wernberg, 2007; Holmqvist, Gustavsson & Wernberg, 2008; Holmqvist & Mattisson, 2008; Holmqvist, Lindgren, Mattisson & Svarvell, 2008). The learning object's critical aspects depend on the level of familiarity students have achieved about the object. A person's learning rests on what aspects or features they have discerned, and what they have not yet discerned. What has already been discerned is no longer considered a critical aspect, since the student has already and developed understanding of that particular aspect.

Introducing a second language in a so called natural way or a more traditional way is a decision a teacher has to make. The way grammar should be presented in language classes has been the subject of ongoing discussion in the field of educational research. Teaching grammar in the traditional way by focusing on rules and structures, although once the standard, is no longer considered optimal for the learner. Rather, it is claimed (e.g., by proponents of the Natural Approach [citation]) that such an approach shifts the focus away from more communicatively essential aspects of language study, such as fluency and vocabulary. The so-called „natural approach” claims grammar in this way is not needed in a supporting communicative school environment. At the same time, it is asserted that students should nevertheless be made aware of grammatical structures (Harmer 1987; Lightbown & Spada, 2003; Krashen 1981; Malmberg 2000; Tornberg 2000). How can effective awareness be brought about? Therefore, we must consider how to proceed if the student is to acquire a solid foundation in the targeted language's grammar. For one thing, the teacher must decide whether this structure is to be presented as grammatical rules, or conveyed by some other, less obtrusive, methodology. This study examines how teachers present the learning objective (in this instance, the 'suffix' *s*¹ at the end of English words) to students, and what students seem able to learn at different ages and school levels.

Methodology of Research

The methodology used in this project is known as a learning study with parallel lessons (Holmqvist 2006). It is based on variation theory (Marton & Booth 1997; Runesson 1999; Holmqvist 2004; Marton & Tsui 2004), an approach that gives special attention to the critical aspects of the learning object, i.e., what a student must discern in order to understand a phenomenon or develop abilities. The study also concentrates on what aspects of the learning object are presented to students and whether students are offered to discern several of these aspects simultaneously.

A learning study begins by defining the learning object, then moves on to analyze its critical aspects. Before instruction commences, testing is used to assess each student's prior knowledge of the subject. Training in English as a Second Language (ESL) is provided to teachers long before they enter the classroom, and a teacher's experience in a particular subject area is kept in mind in developing the curriculum. After these preliminaries have been attended to, a lesson plan based on variation theory is designed. As part of this research design, each lesson is documented on videotape and followed up by a post-test. Although teachers must be committed to implementing the lesson plan and its objectives, they should also be responsive to student interaction and let themselves be guided by it in choosing ways to present the learning object.

Lessons are analyzed jointly by teachers and researchers. Student learning is measured by tests given to the pupils before, after and four weeks after the research lessons. At the end of the instructional period the results were evaluated in conjunction with the video recording of the lesson. All pupils' parents had signed consents to participate, and the research design has followed the ethic guidelines given by the Swedish Research Council. In a learning study cycle (Holmqvist & Nilsson 2005) the results of the prior lesson are taken into consideration when planning subsequent lessons. In this way, areas in need of improvement to boost learning outcomes are identified. In our study, however, lessons were taught simultaneously to five classes in order to compare what students on different grade levels learned from the presentation of the same learning object. In an ordinary cycle, one or more lessons would be planned by the researchers together with the teachers. The results of the first lesson will then be used to improve the design of future lessons. The aim of our learning study was instead to describe what students of diverse

ages and educational levels are able to grasp about the same learning object. The goal of a learning study cycle is to work out the design of each lesson so that students learn as much as possible. In some studies post-tests are administered after intervals of four to six weeks to determine if a newly-acquired ability or body of knowledge has been retained. A learning study concludes with a summary and written documentation of the project.

Learning object

The learning object in this study was to teach students what the *s* or *'s* added to an existing word signals. Since in English an *s* can have many different meanings at the end of a word, this is a broad and complex learning object. It has been identified as a difficult area to master when learning English as second language (Malmberg 2000; Brown & Yule 1983; Lightbown & Spada 2003). Such an *s* can indicate the plural of a noun (as in *dogs*). On the other hand, when preceded by an apostrophe, it can denote the genitive (possessive) form of a noun (*Simon's* dog is lost). Or it can represent a contraction of two words (*it's* for „it is“). In addition, a single *s* added to the end of a verb signifies the third person singular of the present tense (Simon *reads* a book). The same suffix *s* can also indicate that a possessive pronoun is used independently (The books are *yours*). To complicate matters even further, there are some words that have an *s* in the common cases (*always*), *not* indicating anything else.

After analyzing the results of a preliminary student screening, critical aspects of each of the above instances were determined and used to design the tests in our study. We assumed that a teacher's awareness of the critical aspects of the learning object is essential in order to improve student learning. Screening showed that many students confused *his* with *he's*. Other students had difficulties with *yours* because they referred to the structure of the Swedish language to derive its meaning, i.e., they confounded the *t*- and *d*-gender markers in Swedish with independent and dependent possessives. *Dog's* and *dogs* were also commonly interchanged, and some misunderstood the difference between *student's* and *students'*. A learning object's critical aspects will depend on what working knowledge of the target language students already possess or the level of formal English grammar they have mastered. On the basis of the screening, teachers incorporated relevant grammatical information about the structure of English into their lessons on the *s* suffix.

Implementation

Before collecting data, our preparations included clearly delineating the learning object and refreshing any prior knowledge of the topic among the students, whose age and ability to understand the targeted language differed considerably. In order to ascertain how the understanding of the learning object varies over ages, we selected one class each from grades five (12 pupils) and eight (16 pupils), in compulsory school, and the first grade of each of three programmes in upper secondary school (childcare for school children [class C – 20 pupils], natural science [class N – 18 pupils], and social science [class S – 23 pupils]). The classes were chosen because it was in these the students previously had their teacher training period. The classes represent ordinary Swedish school classes. Since all Swedish children are integrated in the same classes in the nine-year compulsory school, but not in upper secondary school, it was decided to choose three different classes from upper secondary school (class C, N and S) to represent this heterogeneous.

Test material

Initially, a short text was used to screen students and determine what they knew. „A Dog's Story“ (figure 1) contained two words in genitive form, two in plural, two contractions, two words in the third person singular present, and three words as independent possessive pronouns. In addition to these five categories, a distracter, *always*, was included.

A dog story

Explain the meaning of all underlined –s in the story below:

In a small village lives a dog called Pongo. His (1) tail is fluffy and white. He always (2) picks up Simon's (3) shoes (4). He's (5) very afraid of other dogs (6). One morning another dog comes (7) and steals Simon's shoes. Its (8) teeth are big and sharp.

– Hey! That's not yours (9)! barks Pongo.

Pongo runs after the other dog.

– It's (10) Simon's! he barks.

Pongo tries to bite the other dog's (11) tail. The dog gets surprised and drops the shoes. Pongo goes (12) back to Simon with the shoes. Simon says:

– You are not afraid of other dogs anymore, good dog!

Pongo smiles.

Figure 1. The screening: A dog story. (Holmqvist & Lindgren, 2007).

The results of the screening were assessed quantitatively and qualitatively with regard to aspects critical for learning. As cited above, this formed the basis for developing the research lesson, the pre- and post-tests. „A Dog's Story” was used in all five classes. Students were asked to pay attention to words the research team had targeted as critical for interpreting the suffix *s*. At the end of the screening, it was possible to identify deficiencies in each group by examining student responses to questions based on the specified learning object.

The pre-test (figure 2) that followed consisted of filling in the blanks to complete twenty English sentences. It was designed to assess understanding of the various applications of the *s* suffix. Students were offered two choices—one correct and one incorrect—for each blank. They were given no prior information about the pre-test's contents, nor were teacher's permitted to see the test in advance. The test was administered by graduate students who assisted the researchers in the project. The sentences themselves employed contrasting pairs, such as *he's/his*, *your/yours*, *student's/students'*, *comes/come*, *it's/its*, *go/goes*, and *dog's/dog*.

1. Comes or come?

- My brothers _____ home at night.
- Sara, _____ here!
- Sara _____ here every day.
- My father _____ home at 4'o clock.

2. It's or its?

- _____ nose is black.
- _____ a nice dog.

3. Your or yours?

- It is _____ pen.
- The pen is _____.
- It is _____ shoes.
- The shoes are _____.

4. He's or his?

- _____ dog is old
- _____ fourteen years old.

5. Student's or students'?

- The _____ book is very good.
- The _____ bus is late.

6. Dog's or dogs?

- The _____ tail is fluffy.
- The _____ are running.

7. Go or goes?

- I _____ there every day.
- My sisters _____ there every day.
- Simon, _____ home!
- Simon _____ home.

Figure 2. The pre-test. (Holmqvist & Lindgren, 2007).

The various different meanings that *s* or *'s* may have at the end of a word were discerned by students in different ways, depending on their prior knowledge of English. This article describes those aspects in the order they would normally be introduced in elementary school grades four through six. Presented first are contractions, which continue to be problematical for some students in the fifth grade. They are followed by plural *s*. After that comes the third person singular present *s*, then the genitive (or possessive) *s*, and finally the *s* suffix in possessive pronouns. The tables indicate the number and the percentage of correct answers.

Contractions

Contractions use an apostrophe to signify that a letter or letters have been omitted. They are mainly employed in narratives to reproduce colloquial speech. In writing contractions are employed mainly to reproduce conversational speech. Since the Swedish syllabus mandates encouraging students to speak English as a primary duty of foreign language instructors, contractions already appear in English textbooks for beginners. They may confuse the student for two reasons: a) contractions are not used in Swedish, and b) the same English apostrophe in a contraction also appears in the genitive form. Thus, *Simon's* can be genitive (as in *Simon's house*) or it can represent the contraction of „Simon + is” (*Simon's back already*). Since students see the contraction in print in their earliest textbooks, they may know that it means „Simon is”, but may not realize that it is actually constructed of two separate English words, or that the same contraction can also mean „Simon has” (e.g., *Simon's got the key*).

The critical aspects for understanding contractions shift, depending on the level of English a student has achieved. Fundamentally, two aspects must be discerned: 1) an apostrophe in a certain context signals that something has been omitted, and 2) the letter *s* is what remains of the omitted word. Students must learn which words may be foreshortened by the letter *s*, and be trained to focus on the meaning of the whole sentence. On a more advanced level, the critical aspects consist in recognizing the contrast between almost identical elements, such as *it's* and *its*. Initially, students might see both expressions as one and the same: in fact, screening results show that some interpret *its* as an intended script *it's* with the apostrophe accidentally omitted. With such reasoning, it will be hard for the student to distinguish the difference in print. On a higher level, the same problems may occur with a word like *Simon's* as a contraction or a genitive.

The teachers in our research project were able to elucidate how such knowledge develops over the years. In the fifth grade, students are novices in this area and begin to understand the contraction of the verb *to be* in the present tense (as in *I'm, he's, it's*), yet they remain unaware that *'s* can also be a contraction of *to have* in the present (as in *He's got money*). Their comprehension of the *s* suffix seems to be at a fundamental level for fifth graders. Table 1 shows the results of pre-test questions about contractions. (The relevant questions are numbers 2 and 4 in Figure 2.)

By the time most students reach the eighth grade, their understanding of contractions improves considerably, and in upper secondary school they have few problems in this regard. However, some students do not achieve at the same pace and, as a result, do not grasp the concept of contractions so readily. It is important that teachers know which critical aspects must be presented for students to discern in order that the learning objective be mastered.

The follow-up post-test in both grade eight and upper secondary school showed a consistently high number of correct answers. On the other hand, students in grade five showed poorer scores on follow-up testing. The fact that their understanding had diminished may have many causes. Assuming they initially did understand the concept of the *s* suffix, it may be that the presentation of additional explanations confused them. At the screening, fifth grade students answered 43% of the questions on contractions correctly; immediately after the lesson, the percentage rose to 54%; but on the delayed post-test it fell to 30%.

Table 1. Results of pre-, post- and delayed post-test concerning learning objective: contractions (%).

Test	Class 5	Class 8	C 1	N 1	S 1
Pre test	43	92	80	100	96
Post test	54	97	100	100	100
Delayed post test	30	87	94	99	100

Plural s

In the analysis of data on plural *s*, certain critical aspects were determined. Although different problems were found in various classes, a pattern did emerge. Students seemed to have difficulty differentiating between the plural and possessive forms of nouns, particular when the words *student's* [5a] and *students'* [5b] were contrasted. A critical aspect is that the apostrophe is not used in Swedish:

1. (Eng.) the students = (Sw.) *studenter*
2. (Eng.) the students' = (Sw.) *studenternas*
3. (Eng.) the student's = (Sw.) *studentens*

In Sweden, plural *s* is introduced early in the teaching of English as second language. According to the theory of „the natural approach”, this morpheme is acquired at about age five in one's mother tongue (Brown & Yule 1983). Despite its timely introduction into the Swedish curriculum, plural *s* causes a lot of problems for Swedish students on all grade levels. Our pre-test showed that students in grade five had approximately the same understanding of plural *s* as students in class N. Some items were especially difficult for students to understand, i.e., „my brothers **are**” [1a] and „my sisters **are**” [7b] compared to „my sister **is**” and „my brother **is**”, as the verb differs between singular and plural form in English but not in Swedish (är [Sw.]/is [Eng.], är [Sw.]/are [Eng.]) After the lesson, a post-test assessment indicated that fifth grade students had a poorer understanding of the learning object than before the lesson, while results were unchanged in two of the groups as shown in table 2. Follow-up testing confirmed that in only two upper secondary school classes had students improved their comprehension of the plural *s*.

The learning curve seemed to remain stable for four weeks after the research lesson was taught, except in the fifth grade, where an increase in understanding was recorded. We assume that students either learned more about the topic outside the classroom during those four weeks.

Table 2. Results of pre-, post- and delayed post-test concerning the learning object: plural s (%).

Test	Class 5	Class 8	C 1	N 1	S 1
Pre test	55	65	68	57	74
Post test	47	67	67	79	84
Delayed post test	63	64	66	74	79

The suffix *s* appended to the verb in the third person singular present in English is difficult for Swedish students to grasp, since it does not correspond with the structure of the Swedish language. According to the „natural approach”, it is an element mastered relatively late in childhood (Brown & Yule 1983). Understanding that in English such an *s* indicates the present, although in Swedish an *r* denotes the present tense independently of person, constitutes one of the most critical aspects in mastering this phenomenon. Testing shows that its comprehension gradually increases as students grow older. For many students in upper secondary school, however, the *s* suffix in third person singular present verbs still causes difficulty.

Table 3 shows the results of the tests. The discrepancy in levels of understanding from one group to another is not as great as in the case of contractions. „My brothers come” [1a] and „my sisters go” [7b] were items most students had difficulty responding to correctly. When „comes” or „goes” are stated as answers instead of come and go, the substantive *s* might have affected the form of the verb – *my sisters comes*. In other cases, knowing how to add *s* to a verb when *he/she/it* is the subject can lead to unforeseen errors. For example, the plural *brothers* mistakenly may be thought to determine the verb that follows in the same way the singular *he* does; or the plural *sisters* may be treated just as though it was *she*. As mentioned above, knowing that one add’s a single letter *r* to indicate the present tense in Swedish may influence the way students view the suffix *s* in English—in this instance, seeing it as consistently signifying the present tense. Thus, the plural *s* in the word *brothers*, if misconceived as a singular noun plus the marker of the present indicative, may cause students to select *comes* as the verb in agreement with it.

In the screening, some students translated the English verb *come* as an infinitive form in Swedish. This may explain why they took *comes* to represent the present tense, irrespective of the subject, and may have thought *you comes* is correct. The study also shows that students seem to concentrate only on the tense of the verb and thereby miss the need for agreement between subject and verb in English. The sentence that resulted in the most incorrect answers (even in the post-test) was „My sisters go there every day” [7b]. Many students wrote *goes* instead of *go*. The same problem arose, although to a lesser extent, with the sentence „My brothers come home at night” [1a]. Furthermore, some students replaced the subject of a sentence with the one of the personal pronouns *he/she/it* to account for the *s* suffix in a verb that followed, although the given subject was the name of a person, place, or thing.

Awareness is required about the structure of Swedish grammar as well as an ability to contrast this against the structure of English grammar in order to master suffix *s* on third person singular present verb in English. It is possible that teachers negotiate the strong impact of this connection between the languages when students learn, or do not learn. As the aspects no longer are critical for the teacher *s/he* seems to negotiate them and do not make it possible for the students to discern.

Table 3. Results of pre-, post- and delayed post-test concerning the learning object: third person singular present verb form (%).

Test	Class 5	Class 8	C 1	N 1	S 1
Pre test	55	75	76	79	78
Post test	53	79	77	87	84
Delayed post test	57	76	74	85	82

Genitive s

The genitive *s* can be hard for Swedish students to discern, since an apostrophe is not used to indicate the possessive in the Swedish language. In addition, a student must learn to differentiate between the contraction (*it’s*) and the genitive form (*Simon’s*), both of which employ an apostrophe.

One of the critical aspects that emerged from the analysis of the research lessons concerned the placement of the apostrophe, particularly in the example *student's* and *students'*. Swedish students tended to use the genitive and the contraction interchangeably, although less than might have been expected. Distinguishing between *dog's* and *dogs* was also problematic for them. This confusion between the plural and genitive forms of nouns was found in grades five and eight.

Learning to discern the genitive is a slow process. Very young children have difficulties with the genitive when they begin to learn English as second language. In our study, scores of fifth graders on questions involving the genitive *s* actually dropped on the post-test. Although most eighth grade students correctly answered questions requiring them to choose between *dog's* and *dogs*, on the upper secondary level there were still students who had problems differentiating one from the other. Remarkably, only 56% of the students in class N could identify the correct form when asked about *dog's* and *dogs* on the pre-test. We noted that students continued to have problems distinguishing *student's* from *students'* on the upper secondary school level.

Many students seem to hear and write the form they think sounds best, whether or not they can express the reason why. This was confirmed by the incorrect explanations they came up with in the screening, despite having given the correct answer. Another finding that emerged from the analysis of the research lessons was that teachers sometimes misconceive what a student does or does not know. For example, most students actually do not know what *s* indicates in the word *Simon's*. Nevertheless, teachers may take for granted that students do know this already, and so they concentrate on more advanced grammatical structures and rules, such as the third person singular present form. There seems to be a need for more open discussion to make teachers aware of what, in fact, students understand or fail to understand. Such a focus would enable teachers to ground their instruction on student needs, rather than continuing to present material *they believe* will benefit students the most.

Table 4. Results of pre-, post- and delayed post-test on the learning object: genitive *s* (%).

Test	Class 5	Class 8	C 1	N 1	S 1
Pre test	54	67	68	47	85
Post test	41	70	73	80	93
Delayed post test	71	65	79	65	86

Possessive pronouns

Possessive pronouns express ownership. In the sentence *This is my hat*, „my” is linked to the noun that follows it and expresses ownership—that is, it is a dependent possessive pronoun. On the other hand, in the sentence *They are yours*, „yours” stands alone; it still signals ownership, but it does so without referring back to the substantive—i.e., it is independent. Several critical aspects are involved here, suggesting that this is the most difficult (and perhaps most neglected) aspect for Swedish students to grasp in learning the various meanings of the suffix *s*. For example, in English *your* and *yours* do not refer to the different forms of „your” according to gender (*din/ditt* or *din/dina* in Swedish). The English word *yours* (*din* [Swe] singular form and *dina* [Swe] plural form) do not differ according to independent possessive form in Swedish, but do to singular and plural form as shown in Table 3. In English, *your* and *yours* do not change according to singular or plural form. While they can relate to the plural, the suffix *s* in these words signals neither singular nor plural. The differences in the languages make Swedish students translate „yours” as *dina* (*your* in plural form), which is incorrect, as shown in Figure 3.

	Dependent possessive form* *Swedish/English	Independent possessive form* *Swedish/English
<i>d</i> -gender	<i>din/your</i>	<i>din/yours</i>
<i>t</i> -gender	<i>ditt/your</i>	<i>ditt/yours</i>
Singular	<i>din/your</i>	<i>din/yours</i>
Plural	<i>dina/your</i>	<i>dina/yours</i>

Figure 3. Differences between Swedish and English possessive pronouns.

The result of the pre-test shows inadequate comprehension of the possessive pronouns discussed above. In „A Dog Story,” only a few students could explain the meaning of the *s* in „yours”. A commonly voiced explanation was „it sounds correct”. Other students explained it as *dina* (plural form of *your* and *yours* in Swedish). In this case, the letter *s* is thought to correspond to the letter *a* in the plural form of the Swedish *dina* (see Figure 3). Such a misunderstanding occurred in every class. Some students confused the form *his* with the contraction *he’s*, which may result either from there being no contractions with apostrophes in Swedish, or because Swedish people tend to pronounce both words the same („*hees*”). The latter problem was most common in grades five and eight, and to a certain extent in class C in upper secondary school as well.

A progression is seen across the elementary and secondary school years, with scores decreasing from the fifth grade to upper secondary school. Although differentiating between *his* and *he’s* is a big problem for fifth graders, by the time students reach upper secondary school, they seem to have acquired this knowledge. Post-test scores at the end of the lesson showed an improvement from pre-test results (see Table 5). In the case of *his* and *he’s*, however, the number of correct answers increased only moderately. Grade-level differences appeared independently of different classes: scores for students in the fifth grade and class N in upper secondary school decreased, while those of the eighth grade and class S in upper secondary school increased. Class C in upper secondary school had unchanged scores.

Table 5. Results of pre-, post- and delayed post-test concerning the learning objective: possessive pronouns (%).

Test	Class 5	Class 8	C 1	N 1	S 1
Pre test	58	87	94	98	96
Post test	52	100	94	93	100
Delayed post test	58	84	94	99	98

The delayed post-test showed scores that were higher with regard to *your* and *yours* than on the pre-test and post-test in grade five and class N in upper secondary school. The results for class C in upper secondary school also showed a moderate increase. Class S in upper secondary school showed about the same results and grade eight decreased slightly.

Discussion

The video analysis documented the fact that all teachers chose to teach about the learning object in Swedish, not English. Teachers explained that it was already very difficult for students to comprehend the learning object, and that if the lesson were given in English, it would further complicate things unnecessarily.

According to our findings, the university students were able to describe how EFL students’ knowledge about suffix *s* when learning English as second language has developed. The testing results, together with the analysis of the lessons in the learning study, have given us a better

understanding of why students responded to questions as they did on the pre- and post-tests. We now know how students in different grade levels discern the letter *s* at the end of English words. From a didactic perspective, this understanding can be used to design instruction that takes into account the way students experience the learning object's critical aspects. Certain elements appear to be essential for students to comprehend if they are to acquire mastery. Our findings indicate that contractions and independent possessive pronouns are difficult for students in the fifth grade to understand for students in the fifth grade. Nevertheless, students in grade levels eight and upper secondary school seem to have a good grasp of contractions with *'s*, and a sense of the correct use of independent possessive pronouns, even though they may not be able to explain why such words sometimes conclude with an *s*.

Furthermore, many students misunderstood what the suffix *s* signifies in third person singular verbs. They seem to believe it only indicates the present tense. Others consider this suffix **to be** a plural marker linking the verb to the subject. Errors in this regard are understandable if one realizes that some students assume the *s* suffix functions like suffix letters in their mother tongue, so that they translate *you/yours* with *din/ditt* or *din/dina* (see Figure 3). Finally, an unexpected chain of thought was initiated in one case by the confusing word *always*. Here one student, who conjectured that the word was originally created from *all* (shortened to *al*) + *way* in plural form, hence *always*, attempted a historical linguistic explanation!

A student's mother tongue influences the way a target language is viewed. Analysis of the research lessons shows that in several cases teachers failed to realize their students were trying to comprehend the material being taught by drawing parallels to their native language. Teachers who focused solely on the target language did not seem to understand why certain student mistakes arose. It would be important for effective teaching that similarities and contrasts with a student's native tongue be explicitly dealt with when teaching a second language. The study is a description of how combining teacher education and in-service training by means of learning study is carried out, and how the student's learning develops in three different instructional designs. The students' learning outcomes give the teachers a possibility to relate their instructions to the results and change their design to a more powerful way of meeting the learning needs of the students. In this particular study the combination of students in the teacher training programme and in-service training teachers, who carry out a learning study, shows how the model can be used by both beginners and practiced on teaching. The learning study model is possible to use in teacher training programmes as well as in in-service training for teachers, both apart and in a combination.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participating teachers, their students and the research team Learning Design at Kristianstad University College, Sweden. The article draws from a research project funded by the Swedish Research Council, having as numeric reference: 721-2002-3386.

References

- Ashori, E., Hamrin, A-M., Holmqvist, M., Håkansson, K., Persson S., & Håkansson, S. (2007). Betydelsen av bokstaven *s* i slutet av engelska ord. [The significance of the letter *s* in the end of English words]. [In Holmqvist, M. ed (2007). *Lärande i skolan. [Learning at school]*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1983) *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Harmer, J. (1987) *Teaching and Learning Grammar* (London, Longman).
- Holmqvist, M. (2004) *En främmande värld [A strange world.]* (Lund, Studentlitteratur).
- Holmqvist, M. (Ed) (2006) *Lärande i skolan – Learning study som skolutvecklingsmodell [Learning at school. Learning study as a tool in school development]* (Lund, Studentlitteratur).
- Holmqvist, M., Gustavsson, L., & Wernberg, A. (2007) Generative learning. Learning beyond the learning situation, *Educational Action Research, vol 15, no 2, pp 181–208*.

- Holmqvist, M., & Lindgren, G. (2007). Att analysera lärande i engelska utifrån ett variationsteoretiskt perspektiv [Analysing learning English based by the Variation Theory]. In Lainio, J., & Leppänen, A., 2007. Linguistic Diversity and Sustainable Development. Papers from the ASLA symposium in Eskilstuna, 9-10 November. (Uppsala: ASLA Swedish Science Press).
- Holmqvist, M., Gustavsson, L., & Wernberg, A. (2008). Variation Theory - A tool to improve education. In: A. E. Kelly & R. Lesh (Eds) *Handbook of design research methods in education* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum).
- Holmqvist, M., Lindgren, G., Mattisson, J., & Svarvell, T. (2008). Instruction built on learners' previous knowledge by using the Variation theory. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century (Recent Issues in Education)*, Vol. 6, pp 86–95.
- Holmqvist, M., & Mattisson, J. (2008). Variation theory: a tool to analyse and develop learning at school. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century (Peculiarities of Contemporary Education)*, Vol. 7. pp. 31–38.
- Krashen, S. (1981) *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning* (Oxford, Pergamon Press).
- Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (2003) *How Languages Are Learned* (revised edn) (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Malmberg, P. (Ed) (2000) *I huvudet på en elev* [In the pupil's head] (Stockholm, Bonnier utbildning).
- Marton, F., & Booth, S. (1997) *Learning & Awareness* (Mahwah, NJ, Earlbaum Associates).
- Marton, F. & Tsui, A. (2004) *Classroom Discourse and the Space of Learning* (Mahwah, N.J, Lawrence Erlbaum).
- Runesson, U. (1999) *Variationens pedagogik*. [The pedagogy of variation] (Göteborg, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis).
- Tornberg, U. (2000) *Språkdiradik* [Didactics of language acquisition] (Malmö, Gleerup).

Advised by Laima Railienė, Šiauliai University, Lithuania

Mona Holmqvist Associate Professor, Kristianstad University College, SE-291 88 Kristianstad, Sweden.
Phone: +44203241.
E-mail: Mona.Holmqvist@hkr.se
Website: <http://www.hkr.se/mona-holmqvist>

Gunilla Lindgren PhD, Kristianstad University, SE-291 88 Kristianstad, Sweden
Phone: +44203000.
E-mail: gunillalindgren97455@gmail.com
Website: <http://www.hkr.se>