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June 16, 2008

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## **From Pass to Pass with distinction +**

Teachers' assessments and grading of pupils' written production

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C-level degree paper, 15 hec

Interdisciplinary Degree Project

Teacher Education Programme

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Spring 2008

## **Abstract**

The present essay addresses the issue of equivalent grading and assessment of pupils' written production. The main question was how teachers assess and grade pupils' essays. Three essays written by pupils in year nine were assessed and graded by four different teachers; the grades awarded varied from Pass to Pass with distinction+. The teachers' assessments as well as the pupils' essays were analysed and discussed in relation to the syllabus for English and the assessment guidelines accompanying the national tests. It was shown that teachers generally base their assessment on the syllabus and/or on the assessment guidelines accompanying the national tests. However, the differences found in the assessment and grading of the texts could be explained by the fact that the teachers stressed different assessment factors, i.e. they considered some assessment factors and/or some goals to be more important than others. For instance, some of the teachers emphasised formal correctness while others stressed the importance of a comprehensible content.

## **Keywords**

Equivalent grading; teachers' assessment practice; assessment of written production

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Assessment and grading is the centre of attention in the current school debate in Sweden. Over the past few years, several reports have been published by the National Agency for Education concerning fair assessment and grading. For example, the National Quality Review (2000) which states that the conditions for equivalent assessment and grading in Swedish schools are deficient. The statistics presented in the report show that pupils who do not pass the core courses, i.e. Swedish, English and Mathematics, vary from 4 to 40 percent in different schools, despite the fact that the pupils have comparable social and economical backgrounds (Nationella kvalitetsgranskningar 2000:167-168). The diversity found in the grading at the different schools is explained by the fact that the teachers working at the schools generally have very different interpretations of the contents of the syllabi as well as the grading system as a whole. In turn, the teachers' differences in their interpretation of the syllabi are explained by the fact that there is a lack of discussions about grading and assessment in and between schools.

As a result of the National Quality Review, the National Agency for Education published a plan for equivalent grading: "Handlingsplan för en rättssäker och likvärdig betygssättning" (2004), presenting suggestions on how equivalent grading could be attained; First of all, on the job training in grading and assessment for all teachers is to be guaranteed. Secondly, the headmaster and school management of each school are instructed to take more responsibility in actively evaluating the results of the national tests in relation to the final grades awarded.

Another report from the National Agency for Education on equivalent assessment and grading is "Likvärdig bedömning och betygssättning" (2004). This report contains guidelines for structuring the local syllabi in relation to the national syllabi and clarifications of their different roles. The report states that the role of the national syllabi is to give general information, directions and goals of each subject. The national syllabi should thus answer the following questions: why the subject is relevant, what the role of the subject is, how it should be taught (only a few very general directions) and finally, when it should be taught (only a few very general directions) (2004:22). Since the content of the national syllabus is so general, the local syllabus should function as a clarification of the national syllabus (2004:19).

The local syllabus should contain answers to the following more specific questions: when the teaching should take place, what material should be used, what teaching methods should be used, and finally how the answers to these questions can lead to a development that is in accordance with the goals stated in the national syllabus (2004:22). According to the same report, the planning of the local syllabi is vital when it comes to preventing diversity in grading. The headmaster of each school is responsible for making sure that discussions on how equivalent grading can be attained take place continuously. All the teachers concerned are to take an active part in these discussions.

Other efforts that have been made in order to prevent inequalities in grading are extensive assessment materials and samples of graded works, which accompany the national test, as well as diagnostic materials published by the National Agency for Education. However, the effects of the various efforts have not been satisfactory (Handlingsplan för en rättssäker och likvärdig betygssättning 2004:1). The latest report “Provbetyg- Slutbetyg- Likvärdig bedömning? Sammanfattningen” (2007) shows that the grades awarded in Swedish schools are still not equivalent. For instance, there is a clear tendency that pupils with high scores on the national tests will have the same or lower final grades in schools which have a high average proficiency level, while pupils with high scores on the tests will have the same or higher final grades in schools which have a low average proficiency level.

Equivalent assessment and grading are of great interest for all teachers who grade their pupils' works as well as for the pupils in the Swedish school system since they are the ones affected by the grades awarded. The present study will address the issue of equivalent assessment and grading, and it thus aims to make a contribution to the current debate about equivalent grading.

## **1.2 Aim and Scope**

The aim of the present study is to compare how different teachers assess and grade essays written in English by Swedish intermediate learners. The main questions that will be discussed are: what different teachers' assessments consist of and whether the teachers' assessments are based on the Swedish national syllabus or not. Both the content and the language of the student essays will be analysed and discussed in order to make the quality of the essays visible. With regard to language, attention will be given to lexical and grammatical errors as well as to any stylistic problems. Focusing on the errors of the essays is of interest since different types of errors have been viewed as more or less serious at different times in the Swedish school. For example, formal correctness used to be emphasised to a higher degree in both former syllabi as well as in schools than what is the case today (Malmberg 2001:16-17).

## **1.3 Material and Method**

The student essays were collected by asking a class, consisting of 25 pupils, in year nine at a school situated on the west coast of Sweden to write about the subject, "One moment in Life", a topic taken from the samples of the national test, written production (available at [www.ped.gu.se/sol/nafs/ep9ex.htm](http://www.ped.gu.se/sol/nafs/ep9ex.htm)). The reason for choosing a sample test was that the sample is supposed to explicitly test the parts of the syllabus concerned with written production. Recycling an old topic was thought to make it easier to analyse whether or not the teachers' assessments were based on the syllabus and/or the assessment guidelines accompanying the national tests.

In order to give the students ample time to prepare before the time of writing, they were given the subject four days ahead of time. During the national test, the pupils have 80 minutes to write an essay, without knowing the subject beforehand ([www.skolverket.se/sb/d/286](http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/286)). The pupils in the present study had only 50 minutes to write their essay. The topic was given beforehand in order to shorten the time of writing.

After the pupils had finished writing, their essays were collected, reviewed and three of them were selected for the purpose of being used in the study. These three essays were chosen because of their interesting and moving character, not because they were thought to represent a certain grade. The texts were typed in order to make them as anonymous as possible before sending out copies to the four teachers taking part in the study. Three of the teachers work in different lower secondary schools in Gothenburg and one in Småland. The pupils were not known to the teachers.

The instructions to the teachers were to make a general assessment of each essay's strengths and weaknesses and then grade it (see Appendix I). After finishing the assessments and grading of the texts, the teachers were asked to answer a questionnaire containing three questions: first, what they find most important when grading essays e.g. style or correctness, secondly, to what extent do the errors of the texts influence the final grade given and thirdly, whether or not the syllabus and the assessment guidelines accompanying the national tests play an important role to them when assessing and grading pupils' essays (see Appendix II). The reason for instructing the teachers to answer the questionnaire after they had finished grading the essays was to avoid giving any leading suggestions with regard to what their assessments should consist of. The questionnaire itself was designed to see if the teachers' explicitly stated strategies for assessing essays were in agreement with their corrections and comments of the three essays.

In short, the materials used in the present study consist of three essays and four teachers' assessment of these essays as well as their answers to a questionnaire. In order to analyse the pupils' essays and the teachers' assessments of the essays, the guidelines accompanying the written production part of the national test (see Appendix III) and the national syllabus (see Appendix III) will be used.

#### **1.4 Plan of study**

The following chapter, "the Swedish school system", is thought to give a brief overview of the Swedish school system, containing information about the national curriculum, the national syllabi, the grading system and finally the national tests. In the next chapter, "Results and Discussion", the pupils' essays as well as the teachers' assessments and grading of the same essays will be analysed and discussed with regard to the syllabus for English and the guidelines for assessment accompanying the national tests. The final chapter, "Summary and Conclusions", consists of a summary and a presentation of the most important results of the present study as well as some remarks about the future challenges of grading and assessment in Swedish schools.

## **2. The Swedish school system**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The Swedish school system comprises preschool, nine-year compulsory school and three-year upper secondary school, each with its own national curriculum. Grades are not given until (the first half of) year eight. Instead, the teacher, the pupil and his/her custodians are to meet at least once a term in order to discuss the pupil's progress.

Since the 1990s, the Swedish school system has gone through considerable changes. The old grading system has been replaced by a new goal related system in which pupils' achievements are assessed in relation to the goals stated in the national syllabi. The old grading system was a group related system, which means that each pupil's achievements were compared to the other pupils' achievements and the final grading was based on the comparison made between the pupils' achievements. Today, pupils are no longer to be compared to each other; instead their individual achievements are to be assessed in relation to the goals (Likvärdig bedömning och betygssättning 2004:12). Another change which was introduced during the same period was the decentralisation of responsibility. As a result of the decentralisation, the national government is today only responsible for setting the goals and framework for the educational system, while the municipalities are responsible for organising and distributing the resources needed to schools within their district. Finally, teachers and principals are responsible for students achieving the goals set by the government (National Assessment and Grading in the Swedish school system 2005:12).

### **2.2 The national curriculum**

The national curriculum strongly emphasises norms and values such as equal rights for everyone, solidarity with the weak, but also skills such as the ability to cooperate with others and critical thinking. The curriculum contains goals related to knowledge, the so called four skills: facts, proficiency, understanding and familiarity, e.g. there is a difference in proficiency from only recognizing and understanding a word when reading it to actually using it in writing or speech (National Assessment and Grading in the Swedish school system 2005:13).



There are also two other types of goals present both in the curriculum and in the syllabi: goals to aim for and goals to attain. The goals to aim for are intended to form the foundation of teaching while the goals to attain describe the skills the pupils should have attained at the end of the course. These goals are general and written as a series of short points such as: the pupils should “develop their ability to consciously form and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge and personal experiences, and show respect and care for the local as well as the global environment” (the national curriculum 2006:12). The reason for the goals to be as broad as they are is to facilitate a freedom for teachers and pupils to decide the contents of the teaching in mutual agreement.

### 2.3 The syllabi

There is a syllabus for each of the twenty subjects in compulsory school. Each syllabus consists of goals to aim for and goals to attain, as already mentioned, but it also contains descriptions of the purpose and character of the subject as well as criteria for awarding different grades (National Assessment and Grading in the Swedish school system 2005:13). The criteria for grading emphasise the qualities of pupils’ achievements, not the actual knowledge of specific areas such as ‘the Antiquity’ in history. It follows that one can expect that pupils with the same grades have equivalent skills, but not the same knowledge of a particular area (Likvärdig bedömning och betygssättning 2004:18-19).

The syllabus for English<sup>1</sup> states that “the subject aims at developing an all-round communicative ability.” The development of communicative competence is emphasised in the syllabus and permeates both the goals to aim for and the goals to attain<sup>2</sup>. Preceding syllabi for English have stressed the need for teaching and learning the *form* of the language. The ability to *use* the language is stressed to a higher degree in today’s syllabus (Malmberg 2001:18-20).

A few examples taken from goals to aim for are: “the teaching of English should aim to ensure that pupils develop their ability to use English to communicate in speech and writing and express their own thoughts with variety and confidence; understand spoken English in different situations and contexts; and reflect over ways of living and cultures in English-speaking countries” (Syllabus for English 2000). The goals to attain with regard to written production will be further developed in section 2.4.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www3.skolverket.se/ki03/front.aspx?sprak=EN&ar=0708&infotyp=23&skolform=11&id=3870&extraId=2087> (accessed March 13, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Communicative competence denotes the ability to use the target language in order to communicate and interact with others, both in written and spoken language (Malmberg 2001:18)

## 2.4 The Swedish grading system

There are three grades in the Swedish school system: Pass, Pass with distinction and Pass with special distinction. The grades are to be based on the criteria for grading presented in the goals to attain in the syllabus. The teacher should make a summative assessment of the pupils' development at the end of the term, using all the information accessible in order to grade the pupil fairly. When grading, no consideration should be taken to the pupils' behaviour or presence during the lessons (unless this is stated as a goal).

The goals to attain consist of minimum requirements of what each pupil must achieve in order to pass the course. A pupil needs to attain all the goals in order to pass, which in turn implies that the grading system is not compensatory i.e. a pupil's strength cannot compensate for the same pupil's weakness (Likvärdig bedömning och betygssättning 2004:18). In other words, if a pupil understands clear speech very well, but cannot take an active part in oral discussions, the pupil would not pass. Since the present essay focuses on pupils' written production, the goals to attain concerning writing should be mentioned. These goals state that the pupils should "be able to ask for and provide information as well as relate and describe something in writing" (Syllabus for English 2000). The goals to aim for, which should influence the grading implicitly, state that the pupils should: "deepen their ability to use English to communicate in speech and in writing, develop their ability to actively take part in discussions and written communication, express their own thoughts in English [...], develop their ability to express themselves with variety and confidence in writing in order to relate, describe and explain as well as give reasons for their views" (Syllabus for English 2000).

In order to attain Pass with distinction, (referring to written production), the pupil should write coherently and with variety; be able to communicate in writing when exchanging information and social contacts, ask and answer questions and adjust his/her language to some different recipients. To attain Pass with special distinction, the pupil should express himself/herself with variety and adjust his/her language to some different purposes and recipients (syllabus for English 2000). One might wonder why the criterion for Pass with special distinction concerning written production is the shortest one, when it is the highest and the most difficult goal to attain. The short answer to that question is that the pupils need to attain all the other goals stated for Pass and Pass with distinction first until the pupil can attain the last goal<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/429/a/11102> (accessed 29 April, 2008)

## 2.5 The national tests

Ericson (2007) states that the overall purposes of national assessment are: “to support and advise teachers in their grading and evaluation of pupils’ achievements, to enhance comparability and equity within the grading system and to clarify the national curricula and syllabi” (Ericson 2007:1). The national assessment material is not intended to cover all areas of the syllabi, partly because some goals are better evaluated continuously during the course. It is therefore important to emphasise that the national assessment system is not decisive when grading, only advisory (National Assessment and Grading in the Swedish school system 2005:19).

According to Ericson (2007:3), five basic principles are used when developing the national assessment material:

- Making the most important assessable
- Giving students the chance to show what they actually know/can do (not primarily detecting what they cannot do)
- Enhancing validity and reliability, i.e. the information gained from the test should represent the proficiency of the test taker
- Detecting as much as possible of individual students’ profiles
- Commenting strengths before weaknesses

In compulsory school, national tests in Swedish, Mathematics and English are provided for year five and year nine. Unlike year five in which the tests are voluntary, it is compulsory for teachers to conduct the tests in year nine, but not compulsory for the pupils to take the test. In upper secondary school, the national tests comprise the same subjects as in compulsory school. In addition, there are tests for all subjects consisting of two or more courses (National Assessment and Grading in the Swedish school system 2005:22).

The national test in English, both for compulsory and upper secondary school consists of four different parts: an oral test, listening comprehension, reading comprehension and finally a writing test. These parts aim at testing pupils’ receptive and oral competence as well as written production and interaction. Extensive teacher guidelines are provided for all materials. These are included in order to support teachers’ assessment. For instance, in the guidelines to the national test written production in year 9, sample texts for each grade are supplied, together with commentaries motivating the grading.

Since the assessment of pupils' written production is the focus of the present essay, the contents of the guidelines dealing with assessing pupils' essays as part of the national test need to be discussed. According to the guidelines, the central parameter which should be focused on when analysing the texts is "to what extent the pupil is willing and capable of expressing a story in a comprehensible and intelligible way" (see Appendix III, my translation). Other parameters deal primarily with the contents or the language of the essays, for instance whether or not the text is coherent and structured, whether the text is informative, if the text is adjusted to the recipient, or if the writer is able to express a message comprehensibly and in a varied way, correctness and much more. It is important to mention that poor content can be compensated by good language use and vice versa (see Appendix III).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In order to answer the overall question how teachers assess and grade pupils' essays, it is necessary to first analyse the quality of the texts, focusing on the contents and the language of the essays (see section 1.2). The main focus will be on the language used in the texts. The first part of the present study will therefore discuss: what kinds of errors are found in the texts and to what extent do these errors influence the grading of the essays. In the second part of the study, the teachers' assessments and grading of the pupils' texts will be analysed and discussed.

Ellis (1994) defines an error as "a deviation from the norms of the target language" (1994:51). The same definition is used in the present study in order to identify the errors of the pupils' texts. Both deviations in correctness and in appropriateness are included in the analysis of the texts.

#### **3.2 Error categories**

The errors found were extracted and sorted into eighteen different categories as shown in Table 3.2:a. The eighteen categories can in turn be sorted into four main categories: grammatical errors, lexical errors, spelling mistakes, style and coherence. Examples of low-proficiency, such as simple sentence structure and too much repetition will also be discussed. The analysis is organised so that each text is analysed separately at first followed by some general comments on the overall impression of the texts at the end.

### 3.2:a Table of the types of errors found in the texts

Error category	Type of error	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
Grammar	Wrong article		3	
Grammar	Concord	1		
Grammar	Wrong tense			1
Grammar	Preposition		3	
Grammar	Wrong word order			1
Grammar	Adverb/Adjective		2	
Grammar	It/there		1	
Grammar	Simple/progressive form		1	
Grammar	Wrong verb form	4	1	1
Grammar	Genitive	1		
Grammar	Quotation mark			1
Lexis	Wrong word		4	
Lexis	Swenglish		1	
Lexis	Unclear meaning/ inappropriate word	2	3	1
Spelling	Spelling <sup>4</sup>	7	23	4
Style	Informal language			3
Coherence	Coherence	2		

The line between the categories “Wrong word”, “Unclear meaning/inappropriate word” and “Coherence” was sometimes difficult to draw. The latter category contains phrases or words that lack coherence with the other phrases or words in the text and/or inconsistent paragraphing e.g. the use of “*this*” without a clear reference (Text I). “Unclear meaning /inappropriate word” consists of words or phrases which are somewhat unclear to the reader when reading the text, for instance “Only around the houses *near me*” (text I). The category “Wrong word” represents the wrong choice of word as in: “I sow that specially flower witch *got me me that light...*” (Text II).

Moreover, the category “Adverb/Adjective” contains phrases like “*specially* flower” (Text II) or “that big yellow house *nearly* the sea” (Text II). The category “Wrong verb form” contains sentences such as: “So we *droved* it home” (text I), and “mam had *drive* into a tree” (text II). Finally, spelling mistakes is the largest category, containing words like “*recieved*” (text I), “It was a *worm, sanny* day” (text II), and “*interessting*” (text III).

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<sup>4</sup> A misspelt word is only counted the first time it appears in the text.

### 3.3 Analysis of the essays

#### 3.3.1 Text I

Text I is a story about the moment the pupil received his/her new moped. The text is rather short and gives an abrupt impression. It should be possible for the pupil to develop his/her thoughts and feelings about the moment. However, the text is coherent with a clear beginning and an end.

What is prominent in the text concerning errors is the use of the wrong verb form. Text I contains verb forms like: “*didn’t drove*”, “*droved*” and “*costed*”, which shows that this pupil is not sure how to conjugate these verbs correctly. However, s/he does not make the same mistakes consistently throughout the essay; e.g. the pupil also writes “*didn’t drive*”. Either the pupil has not proofread his/her text before handing it in, or s/he guesses. According to the teachers’ comments in connection to the assessment of text 1, wrong verb form is considered to be a serious grammatical mistake, despite the fact that it does not block communication.<sup>5</sup> The reason for teachers to consider wrong verb form to be a serious grammatical error is probably because there is usually much focus in lower secondary school on using correct verb forms.

What is not shown in Table 3.2:a is that there are several examples of sentence structure and words or phrases that are not wrong, but if they would be revised or replaced the text would improve notably. For instance, in text I the sentences are very short with little variation: all are main clauses except three sentences that contain a main clause and a subclause and the first three sentences of the text begin with “*It was...*” One also gets the impression that the pupil does not know how to develop the story. There is repetition e.g. the sentence “*I didn’t had my driver’s licence*” appears twice in the text, though the text is very short. This is something which all of the teachers mentioned in their assessments of the text (Table 3.3:a).

On the other hand, the pupil shows that s/he has some successful strategies for explaining words that s/he does not know, which is one of the goals to aim for presented in syllabus for English 2000. For instance, s/he writes “*I didn’t drive on the big road*” (instead of highway). The pupil also shows that s/he knows some more advanced words like “*jealous*” and “*excited*”.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the assessment guidelines accompanying the national test, errors that block communication and errors that impede communication should be dealt with differently, i.e. errors that block communication are worse than those which impede communication.

### 3.3.2 Text II

Text II is a very personal story about the moment when the pupil's mother died. It seems as if the pupil really wants to express his/her inner feelings and the text represents an attempt to communicate his/her thoughts and feelings to the reader. However, s/he lacks the tools to express these thoughts coherently and correctly. As stated by teacher A; "the content is better than the language" (Table 3.3:b).

There are several basic errors in the text. The most severe ones, from my point of view, are the ones sorted under the categories "Wrong words" and "Unclear meanings/inappropriate word", since these errors to some extent disrupt the understanding of the text. For example, s/he writes; "...mam had drive into a tree and died. *Obviously* we went to the hospital..." "*Obviously*" is clearly not an appropriate word in the context. However, after reading the text a couple of times, it becomes clear that the pupil has the ability to organise his/her text in an intelligible and actually quite advanced way (which is quite rare in the ninth grade). The last paragraph refers back to the first paragraph, which shows the pupil's intention to create a coherent and tightly knit story. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, the pupil is not proficient enough to make the text formally correct, which contributes to the impression that the text is still partly incoherent.

### 3.3.3 Text III

In text III, the pupil writes about his/her best moment in life, namely when s/he met his/her girlfriend. The pupil writes vividly and tries to tell the story in an exciting way. From the reader's point of view, it seems as if the pupil is telling the story in real life, which brings a sense of immediacy to the story. For instance, s/he writes "*A girl came towards me when I was on my way to the supermarket and she asked me if I wanted to go to the movies with her. I just thought what the hell I don't even know her. But anyway I said yes...*" However, the essay could be further developed by describing the girl, what movie they saw together and much more.

The overall impression of the text is that there are fewer grammatical mistakes in this text than in the other two (see Table 3.2:a). For example, the pupil consistently uses the past tense, and s/he makes only one mistake, which is probably due to fast writing (*guess* instead of *guessed*). In addition, a more advanced vocabulary and a more complex sentence structure are used in text III compared with the other texts. There are words and phrases such as: "*in my point of view*", "*when I least expected it*", "*randomly*" as well as sentences that contain both main- and subordinate clauses.



What is striking with text III is the use of informal language (Table 3.2:a) The pupil writes sentences like; “*What the hell, I don’t even know her*” and “*Anyway she asked me...*” which is perfectly fine in an informal context, especially in spoken language, but not as appropriate in a formal text. As previously mentioned, it seems as if the pupil *speaks* directly to the reader. This pupil does not appear to know the difference between formal and informal language and has not adjusted his/her text to the recipient. In report 251 published by the National Agency for Education (2003), it is claimed that pupils in today’s schools write as they speak, i.e. they do not know the difference between informal and formal language and when to use which. One of the teachers, teacher B, commented on the pupil’s use of informal language (Table 3.3:c). S/he wrote “some bad language used” referring to “*what the hell...*” However, the same teacher awarded the text a Pass with distinction+ which is a high grade. In other words, the use of formal or informal language does not seem to be a significant assessment factor when grading a text, despite the fact that both the assessment guidelines accompanying the national tests and the syllabus emphasise the need for pupils to learn how to adjust their language to the recipient.

### **3.3.4 General comments on the pupils’ essays**

What is interesting to mention, as a general comment to the three essays, is the lack of concord errors in the three texts. Concord errors are often thought to be the most common grammatical mistake that pupils with Swedish as their first language make when speaking and writing in English. Käll (2008), in a study on assessing writing, found that concord errors, wrong tense and misspelt words were the largest error categories (2008:12). However, the pupils taking part in the present study have not made as many concord errors as the pupils taking part in Käll’s study, though the pupils are comparable regarding proficiency level. The explanation for the lack of concord errors might be that all of the pupils in the present study wrote in the simple past tense, which made it possible for them to avoid concord. This explains why they hardly made such errors. The result would most likely have been different if the pupils had used the simple present or progressive form. The present study of pupils’ errors corroborates Käll’s study concerning the high frequency of misspelt words.

### **3.4 The teachers' assessments**

The second part of the study will answer the questions of what the teachers' assessments consist of if their assessments are based on the syllabus and/or the assessment guidelines provided in connection with the national tests. Table 3.4:a, 3.4:b and 3.4:c the teachers' comments of the pupils' texts.

The teachers' comments have been sorted into the categories "language" and "content" and then into positive and negative comments. Most of the teachers did not make a distinction between language and content when assessing the texts (with teacher A is the exception). Thus, the categorisation is mine. Most of the comments in the tables are direct quotes which explains why some of the comments may be difficult to understand because of the words or the grammar used. There are also some indirect quotes. For instance, teacher B has corrected text I's grammatical errors but only commented on them implicitly by stating: "Many language mistakes when it comes to language proficiency". I have then chosen to write "Many grammatical errors" and "Many spelling mistakes" (Table 3.4:a), since that is what teacher B corrected in the text.

The analysis of Tables 3.4:a, 3.4:b and 3.4:c will focus on one teacher at a time. Thus teacher A's comments about text I, II and III will be followed by a discussion of teacher B's, C's and D's comments of the same texts.

### 3.4:a Teachers' assessment of Text I

Essay 1	Teacher A (Pass)	Teacher B (Pass -)	Teacher C (Pass)	Teacher D (Pass)
<b>Language</b> Strengths	+ Tries to solve a lack of words <i>"big road"</i> . + Some knowledge of words like <i>excited, driver's licence</i>	+There is a structure	+ Good spelling	+ Good fluency
Weaknesses	- <i>"it was"</i> too many times - Many grammatical mistakes like irregular verbs <i>didn't + drove</i> - some spelling mistakes e.g. <i>frist-first, to-too</i> -short sentences	- Many grammatical errors - Many spelling mistakes	- Each sentence is very short - No hard words or expressions are used -Several basic grammatical errors e.g. <i>was-were, have-had, to-too</i>	- Many basic grammatical mistakes e.g. <i>didn't drove</i>
<b>Content</b> Strengths	+	+ the pupil shows a willingness to communicate + the pupil has the reader in mind + the text would be understood by a native speaker	+ easy to understand	+ He/she gets the happy feeling across + Everything is understandable
Weaknesses	-too short, no actual beginning -he/she doesn't write about the actual moment	- very short text	-rather short	-very short

### 3.4:b Teachers' assessment of Text II

Essay 2	Teacher A (Pass)	Teacher B (Pass)	Teacher C (Pass)	Teacher D (Pass)
<b>Language</b>	+ mostly correct verb forms + the student sticks to English all the time though many mistakes	+	+ good use of English (though many mistakes)	+
<b>Weaknesses</b>	- disturbing spelling e.g. <i>worm-warm</i> - use of prepositions e.g. <i>for five years ago</i>	- many basic mistakes concerning grammar and spelling that sometimes disturbs the reader	- many grammatical errors - spelling, (which might be due to 'fast writing' e.g. <i>little or them-then</i> )	- many verbs/time mistakes (grammatical errors) - spelling mistakes
<b>Content</b>	+ describes the day of the mother's death well + the content is better than the language	+ the pupil shows a willingness to tell about a very special and personal situation + the pupil is not afraid of aiming high + the text is structured	+ very good and personal story	+ gets the feeling across + not too short
<b>Weaknesses</b>	- the moment is not crystal clear - her thoughts about the event could be further developed	-	-	- incoherent

### 3.4:c Teachers' assessment of Text III

Essay 3	Teacher A (Pass with distinction -)	Teacher B (Pass with distinction +)	Teacher C (Pass with distinction)	Teacher D (Pass)
<b>Language</b>	+ knows some expressions; <i>seemed interesting, in my point of view</i> +word knowledge: <i>cute randomly</i>	+ writes with good fluency + writes idiomatically well	+ very good use of English + the spelling is generally good + uses a variety of words and expressions, even some advanced e.g. <i>randomly</i>	+ quite good vocabulary e.g. <i>randomly</i> + fluency
<b>Weaknesses</b>	- some spelling mistakes but nothing disturbing -some grammatical mistakes: <i>have having</i> - dangling participle; <i>this was the best...</i>	- some bad language used e.g. <i>what the hell</i> - some spelling and grammatical mistakes	- needs to consider the word order sometimes, and not follow the "Swedish way"	- some wrong verb forms e.g. <i>have having a good life</i> - needs to vary sentence structure <sup>6</sup>
<b>Content</b>	+ some interesting points + the pupil writes about his/her own thoughts	+ 7	+ 7	+
<b>Weaknesses</b>	- the student should develop his/her thoughts and perspectives even more	- it is a pity that the text is not structured	-	- the actual meeting sounds a bit strange

<sup>6</sup> Teacher D had written "too fluent", making clear this was a negative comment. Since the comment is so obscure, I chose to rewrite the comment into "needs to vary sentence structure" since that is how I and my supervisor interpreted the comment.

<sup>7</sup> Note that neither teacher B nor C commented on any strengths with regard to the content of essay III, although they awarded the essay high marks: Pass with distinction+ and Pass with distinction. The same teachers also stated that if the text had not contained so many mistakes or had been so short, it would have been awarded a Pass with special distinction, i.e. the highest mark.

### **3.4.1 Teacher A**

The comments from teacher A show that s/he focuses on both the content and the language when assessing the essays. When focusing on language usage, A writes in plus and minus columns, which makes A's assessments easily accessible. It is likely that both the combined focus on content and language as well as the usage of plus and minus columns when assessing are influenced by the assessment guidelines supplied with the national tests (hereafter called NTG), since A's assessments resemble those guidelines to quite a high extent. However, what differs between the NTG and A's assessments is the focus on the texts' disadvantages.

According to the syllabus as well as the NTG, the focus when assessing pupils' works should be the works' strengths before its weaknesses. Teachers' primary task is to detect what the pupils can do instead of detecting what they cannot do. Teacher A focuses first and foremost on the texts disadvantages, especially text I and II, which were both awarded the grade Pass. The impression one gets when reading A's explanation of the grades is that A tries to justify why the text did not receive a higher mark instead of motivating what the pupil actually did in order to achieve the mark given. However, it is important to have in mind that A knew that the assessments were not going to be presented to the pupils who had written the essays. It follows that the focus on the texts' disadvantages may have been changed into focusing on the texts' advantages instead, if the intention had been that the writers of the texts would read the assessments.

Another reason for A to deal with the texts' weaknesses instead of strengths could be that detecting errors are usually easier than finding strengths, especially when it comes to texts that have poor content or many grammatical errors and simple sentence structure, like text I and II. A's assessment of text III is somewhat different than the first two assessments. There is more focus on the text's strengths, which could be explained by the fact that text III is better, especially the language usage. The teacher has also given the text a higher grade: Pass with distinction (-).

### 3.4.2 Teacher B

Teacher B assesses the essays quite differently compared with teacher A. Teacher B has corrected all the grammatical errors as well as spelling mistakes in the essays, which teacher A also has done, but B has also given suggestions in the margin what the pupils could do in order to improve their writing. B's suggestions point to the fact that B has written his/her comments as if the essays were to be revised by their authors, which A clearly did not. Moreover, B mentions in the questionnaire that s/he sees writing as a process and B seldom instructs his/her pupils to write an essay without giving the pupils the opportunity of revising their texts afterwards, because revision is an important step in improving one's writing skills. Since B has written the assessments as if the writers were to revise their texts, B's assessments are generally much more focused on the strengths of the essays than A's assessments are.

What is interesting to note is that text I and II received more positive comments than text III, though the latter text was awarded a much higher grade (Pass with distinction +). Text I and II only got (Pass- vs. Pass). When B assessed the contents of essay I and II, B wrote that "*the pupil has the reader in mind*" and "*the pupil shows a willingness to communicate*" (Table 3.4:a and 3.4:b). These comments are stated as assessment factors included in the NTG (see Appendix III). However, text III did not receive any positive remarks concerning the content. One gets the impression that the better the text is, according to B, the fewer positive comments it will get. This practice is different from teacher A's assessment practice. There are several possible explanations to the tendency of giving fewer positive remarks. Perhaps the positive comments which text I and II received are present in text III as well, although implicitly. It is also possible that teacher B assumes that the pupil who wrote text III is more proficient than the other two, which B obviously considers him/her to be, since the grade B awarded was higher. B could therefore be more straightforward and clear in what s/he thought pupil III needed to revise, while s/he needed to put more effort in encouraging the other two pupils. Another reason could be a lack of time when assessing the last text, (text I and II were the more elaborately assessed compared with text III).

### 3.4.3 Teacher C

Teacher C's assessments consist of both positive and negative statements, mostly referring to the language used in the essays. Teacher C's comments are briefer than A's and B's, which is probably due to the fact that C had a very busy schedule at the time, as was mentioned before s/he took part in the study.

What is noticeable when analysing teacher C's comments is that s/he focuses a lot more on the language used than the content of the essays, as can be seen in Table 3.4:a and 3.4:b. C only wrote one positive comment for the two essays concerning the content: "*easy to understand*" and "very good and personal story" and one negative: "*rather short*". In connection with the last text, C did not comment at all on the content (Table 3.4:c). Instead, C commented more on the language used (Table 3.4:a, 3.4:b and 3.4:c). The first question in the questionnaire (see Appendix II), i.e. what teachers find most important when grading and assessing pupils' written production on, C answered by saying that the most important things are that the pupils use basic grammar correctly, that they express themselves coherently, with fluency, and with variety. Variety and correctness, which C looked for when assessing, deal exclusively with the language used, not the content. It is therefore not surprising that C did not comment very much on the content in comparison with the language. Another reason why C did not comment on the contents of the essays might be that it is easier to detect language errors, such as spelling and grammatical mistakes, than finding the strengths and weaknesses of the contents of the essays.

### 3.4.4 Teacher D

Teacher D wrote the briefest comments of all the teachers who took part in the study, which makes the interpretation of D's assessments difficult. However, some interpretations are still possible. D seemed to look primarily for a will to communicate and fluency when assessing the essays. D's comments consist of statements like "*good fluency*", "*gets the happy feeling across*" (Table 3.4:a) and "*gets the feeling across*" (Table 3.4:b) and "*fluency*" (Table 3.4:c). In addition, teacher D lists four questions in the questionnaire which s/he finds most important when assessing pupils' written production: "*is the text varied, is it understandable, is there a will to communicate and how clever and intelligent is it?*" (The answer to the last question functions as a criterion for the higher grades: Pass with distinction and Pass with special distinction). These questions resemble the assessment factors listed in the NTG (see Appendix III, my translation) e.g. "is there a will to communicate a message, is the message clear, is the language characterised by fluency and variety?"



One of the things that is different about D's comments in comparison with the other teachers is that s/he does not stress correctness as an important assessment factor. Instead, D considers variety and fluency as more important factors than correctness. However, s/he does say that too many serious grammatical errors can lower the overall impression of a text. However, a few grammatical errors should not lower the final grading of the text, if the text is marked by fluency and variety. In other words, a pupil who makes several grammatical mistakes, but still aims high and writes vividly could thus get a higher mark from teacher D than from the other teachers. Teacher A expresses in his/her answer to question two in the questionnaire that the fewer the grammatical mistakes the higher the grade, which implies that the pupil who aims high and writes vividly but makes many spelling and grammatical mistakes is not likely to be awarded the highest grade from teacher A, B and C.

Another thing which makes teacher D different from the other teachers is the grading of the last text. This essay was awarded the grade Pass by teacher D, while the other teachers graded it Pass with distinction, (from Pass with distinction - to Pass with distinction +). Perhaps D graded it differently because of the different emphasis of assessment factors mentioned above. In other words, the other teachers stressed different assessment factors than teacher D; as a result, they awarded the essay a higher grade. Teacher A, B and C state in Table 3.3:c that the writer has a "very good use of English" (teacher C), "*the pupil writes idiomatically well*" (teacher B) and "*a good word knowledge*" (teacher A). Since pupil III obviously uses more correct grammar forms and spelling than the other two, s/he is awarded a higher grade. Teacher D on the other hand, might be of the opinion that neither the will to communicate nor the fluency is better compared to the other texts, therefore the same grade is given.

## 4. Summary and Conclusions

The overall aim of the present study was to compare how different teachers grade and assess essays written in English by pupils in the ninth grade. Four different teachers' assessments of three pupils' texts were analysed in order to see what the teachers' assessments consisted of and whether or not their assessments were based on the syllabus for English and/or the NTG. The pupils' essays were also analysed and discussed in order to make the quality of the texts visible.

The results of the present study show that teachers' assessment practice are different in many ways. For instance, teacher A's and B's assessment practices differ regarding the focus on the essays' strengths vs. weaknesses in relation to the pupils' level of proficiency, i.e. A wrote more positive comments if s/he considered the text good while B did the opposite. Moreover, teacher C considered formal correctness the most important assessment factor while teacher D found the content more important when assessing.

The present study also showed that all the teachers' assessments were more or less based on the syllabus and the NTG. However, the fact that the teachers emphasised different things in the syllabus and the NTG, resulted in different grades. For instance, teacher A, B, C graded text III much higher than teacher D did, which was probably due to the fact that teacher A, B and C stressed correctness as a more important assessment factor than D did.

Concerning the types of errors found in the essays, spelling mistakes was the largest error category followed by unclear meaning/inappropriate word and wrong verb form. Most of the teachers, A, B and C, treated wrong verb-form as a serious grammatical mistake which lowered the grading of the texts despite the fact that most of these errors would not obstruct the understanding of the texts. Moreover, it is worth noting is that teacher A, B and C did not consider informal language to be a serious mistake, though the goal regarding written production for Pass with Distinction states that the pupil should "adjust his/her language to some different recipients" (see section 2.4). Depending on which goals are stressed when assessing, the final assessment and grading will be very different.

Previous studies have shown that the reason for the diversity in grading in Swedish schools is teachers' different understandings of the contents of the syllabi and the grading system as a whole (see section 1.1). The present study corroborates the findings that diversity in grading is a reality in Swedish schools. However, the present study has shown that the reason for the diversity can be found in the fact that teachers stress the assessment factors stated in the syllabus and NTG differently.

All the teachers in the present study stated that the syllabus and the NTG were important or very important when awarding final grades in year nine. For instance, teacher C's answer to the third question in the questionnaire (Appendix II), which asks whether or not the syllabus and the NTG play an important role when assessing and grading his/her pupils, is "yes, definitely..." and teacher B answers; "yes, especially the assessment guidelines we get with the national tests help me to find the right direction for each mark/level". Since all the teachers in this study use the syllabus and the NTG frequently when grading, the difference in understanding may be surprising. However, the differences appear to be a direct result of the teachers' emphasis of different assessment factors. In other words, the teachers assess the essays according to their own explicit or implicit ranking of the criteria provided in the syllabus and the NTG.

#### **4.1 Final remarks**

The Swedish school system of today is organised in such a way that it is each school's responsibility to concretise the goals stated in the syllabus and it is up to each teacher and his/her pupils to decide the contents and the teaching methods of each course. Since the goals in the syllabus are so general and since there is so much freedom for each school, its teachers and pupils to interpret these goals, unequal grading may be the unavoidable result. Vaguely formulated goals can be expected to result in contrasting interpretations of the same goals. This problem of vague goals may be solved by stating more precise goals and by forming a stricter national governing of Swedish schools. However, that would result in a lower degree of freedom for the teachers and his/her pupils to adjust the contents and the methods to the pupils' interests and needs. The question is therefore what should be prioritized before the other; equivalent grading or the freedom for teachers and pupils to decide and adjust the contents and methods of each course according to their own needs.

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**Text I**

It was when I recieved my moped. It was the 10 of May, 2007. It was a Gilera Stalker. The colour were black and I loved it. It costed a lot of money. I didn't drove it back home because I hadn't recieved my drivers license yet. So we droved it home in a pickup.

I was so excited when I got home. The frist thing I did was to drive it. Even though i didn't had my drivers license. But i didn't drive on the "big road". Only around the houses near me. My friend also came over to see it. I think he was a bit jeaulus. He also wanted to test the moped but i said no because it was to new.

This is one of many happy moments i got.

Please answer in English

**General assessment/comments:**

**What grade should the pupil receive? Please motivate your choice!**

**Text II**

When I was going to the cinema, I saw this flower. That little white flower. In that moment I just remembered my mother who died five years ago.

Then I was ten years old and I still remember my birthday. It was a warm, sunny day and my parents and I were in the huge garden. We sat under our apple tree and ate that banana-cake which my mother always made at the summer. We were so happy because we had just moved to that big yellow house near the sea.

Then we heard my little sister ran, outside and said that mum's telephone called, it was her boss who told her to go to work, it was very necessary. So she ran to the car and just drove away.

Later that evening they called from the hospital and said that mum had driven into a tree and died. Obviously we went to the hospital and after our visit next to the building I saw that special flower which gave me that light I needed and I thought that it said that there was more hope in the world.

I stay there and just looked at that amazing flower, which had helped me through the worst situation in my life and it was like the flower told me one time again that I should remember the hope in the world.

Please answer in English

**General assessment/comments:**

**What grade should the pupil receive? Please motivate your choice!**

**Text III**

I have had a lot of interesting, fun and good moments in my life, but the very best one was when I was about 14 years old. It was in the middle of the day and everything was like always, in my point of view. But then when I least expected it, it happened. A girl came towards me when I was on my way to the supermarket and she asked me if I wanted to go to the movies with her. I just thought what the hell I don't even know her. But anyway I said yes because she was cute and seemed interesting. After the movie I really started to like her because we had a lot of fun in there. Anyway she asked me if she could get my number and I said of course yes. This was how we met and now we are together and having a good life. This was the best moment in my life because who could have guessed that we would be together now. It's funny how things can go just by asking someone randomly if you want to go to the movies. This was my very best moment in my life so far.

Please answer in English

**General assessment/comments:**

**What grade should the pupil receive? Please motivate your choice!**



**Questionnaire**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ (you and your answers will be anonymous in my essay)

**Please answer in English**

1. What do you find most important when grading and assessing pupils' written production, e.g. fluency, style, correctness?

2. To what extent do grammatical errors influence the actual grade of pupils' written production? Please motivate your answer.

3. Do the national syllabus and the basis of grading supplied with the national tests play an important role to you when assessing and grading 'your' pupils' essays?

**Part C – fokus: skriftlig produktion**

När elevernas skriftliga förmåga bedöms, bör det centrala i analysen vara *i vilken mån eleven vill och förmår uttrycka ett innehåll på ett begripligt sätt*. Ett fylligt innehåll kan kompensera en bristfällig språkbehandling, likaväl som ett fungerande språk kan uppväga ett magert innehåll.

## Bedömningsfaktorer

Vid bedömningen kan följande faktorer analyseras:

## Innehåll

- om texten ger uttryck för en vilja att använda språket för att förmedla ett innehåll
- om texten är sammanhängande och strukturerad
- om innehållet är fylligt eller magert/torftigt
- om ämnet är utförligt behandlat – om eleven fokuserar eller bara ytligt behandlar ämnet/de olika punkterna
- om texten är personlig, informativ och engagerad/engagerande
- om texten är anpassad till mottagaren/syftet

## Språk

- begriplighet – förmåga att uttrycka ett budskap klart och tydligt
- ledighet, variation och säkerhet – flyt
- strategier att ta sig runt språkliga problem
- vokabulär och idiomatik (omfång, variation)
- meningsbyggnad – förmåga att binda samman satser och meningar
- korrekthet (vokabulär, idiomatik, grammatik och stavning)

[http://www.ped.gu.se/sol/nafs/ep9\\_ex/bedomn\\_c.pdf](http://www.ped.gu.se/sol/nafs/ep9_ex/bedomn_c.pdf) (accessed 2008-04-23)

## **Syllabus in English**

### **Aim of the subject and its role in education**

English is the mother tongue or official language of a large number of countries, covering many different cultures, and is the dominant language of communication throughout the world. The ability to use English is necessary for studies, travel in other countries and for social and professional international contacts of different kinds. The subject aims at developing an all-round communicative ability and the language skills necessary for international contacts, and an increasingly internationalised labour market, in order to take advantage of the rapid developments taking place, as a result of information and communications technologies, as well as for further studies. The subject has, in addition, the aim of broadening perspectives on an expanding English-speaking world with its multiplicity of varying cultures.

All pupils need to be prepared so that on their own they can further develop their knowledge after completing schooling. The subject thus also aims at pupils maintaining and developing their desire and ability to learn English.

### **Goals to aim for**

The school in its teaching of English should aim to ensure that pupils

- develop their ability to use English to communicate in speech and writing,
- deepen their understanding of spoken English in different situations and contexts,
- develop their ability to actively take part in discussions and written communication, express their own thoughts in English, as well as understand the views and experiences of others,
- develop their ability to use English orally in different contexts in order to relate, describe and explain, as well as give reasons for their views,
- develop their ability to read different types of texts for pleasure and to obtain information and knowledge,
- develop their ability to express themselves with variety and confidence in writing in order to relate, describe and explain, as well as give reasons for their views,
- develop their ability to analyse, work with and improve their language in the direction of greater variation and accuracy,
- develop their ability to use aids and critically examine sources of information,
- develop their ability to reflect over ways of living and cultures in English-speaking countries and make comparisons with their own experiences,
- develop their ability to reflect over and take responsibility for their own language learning and consciously use different ways of working to support their own learning,

– develop their ability to plan, carry out and evaluate tasks on their own and in co-operation with others.

### **Structure and nature of the subject**

The English language and other forms of culture from English-speaking countries are widely accessible in Swedish society. Pupils encounter today many variants of English outside school. They meet English in a variety of contexts: on TV, in films, in the world of music, via the Internet and computer games, in texts and via contacts with English-speaking people. The subject of English provides both a background to and a wider perspective on the cultural and social expressions surrounding pupils in today's international society. The subject covers both examining the meaning conveyed by language and making use of the richness and variety of English, which children and young people meet outside the school.

English should no more than other languages be divided up into separate parts to be learnt in a pre-determined sequence. Both younger and older pupils relate, describe, discuss and reason, even though this takes place in different ways at different language levels and within different subject areas.

The different competencies involved in all-round communicative skills have their counterparts in the structure of the subject. Amongst these is the ability to master a language's form, i.e. its vocabulary, phraseology, pronunciation, spelling and grammar. Competence is also developed in forming linguistically coherent utterances, which in terms of contents and form are increasingly adapted to the situation and audience. When their own language ability is not sufficient, pupils need to compensate for this by using strategies, such as reformulating, or using synonyms, questions and body language. The ability to reflect over similarities and differences between their own cultural experiences and cultures in English-speaking countries is developed continuously and leads eventually to an understanding of different cultures and inter-cultural competence. An additional competence is an awareness of the process involved in learning a language.

### **Goals that pupils should have attained by the end of the ninth year in school (Criteria for the awarding of the grade Pass)**

Pupils should

- understand clear speech, even though regional in nature, in instructions, narratives and descriptions concerning familiar conditions and their own areas of interest,
- be able to actively take part in discussions on familiar subjects and with the help of different strategies communicate effectively,
- be able to orally relate and describe something which they have seen, heard, experienced or read, as well as express and give their reasons on how they understand a topic that is of personal importance,

- be able to read and assimilate the contents of relatively simple literature and other narratives, descriptions and texts putting forward argument in subjects they are familiar with,
- be able to ask for and provide information in writing, as well as relate and describe something,
- have a knowledge of everyday life, society and cultural traditions in some countries where English occupies a central position, as well as be able to make comparisons with their own cultural experiences,
- be able to reflect over and draw conclusions about their way of learning English,
- be able to choose and use aids when reading texts, writing and in other language activities,
- be able, on their own and together with others, to plan and carry out work tasks, as well as draw conclusions from their work.

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<http://www3.skolverket.se/ki03/front.aspx?sprak=EN&ar=0708&infotyp=23&skolform=11&id=3870&extraId=2087>

### **Kriterier för betyget Vål godkänt**

Eleven tillgodogör sig, sammanfattar och kommenterar innehållet i tydligt talat språk från olika språkområden.

Eleven använder strategier som t. ex. omformuleringar och förklaringar för att överbygga språkliga problem.

Eleven talar tydligt och med sammanhang samt anpassar sitt språk till några olika situationer.

Eleven läser, tillägnar sig och kommenterar lättlästa texter, både sådana på sakprosa och skönlitteratur.

Eleven skriver varierat och med sammanhang samt kommunicerar skriftligt vid informationsutbyte och sociala kontakter, ställer och besvarar frågor och anpassar sitt språk till några olika mottagare.

### **Kriterier för betyget Mycket väl godkänt**

Eleven tillgodogör sig, sammanfattar och kommenterar både helhet och detaljer i tydligt talat språk.

Eleven medverkar i olika samtalssituationer och löser språkliga problem på ett effektivt sätt.

Eleven talar tydligt med språkligt flyt, variation och sammanhang.

Eleven tillgodogör sig innehållet i texter av varierande längd, kommenterar dem och drar slutsatser.

Eleven uttrycker sig varierat i skrift och anpassar framställningen till några olika syften och mottagare.

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<http://www3.skolverket.se/ki03/front.aspx?sprak=SV&ar=0708&infotyp=23&skolform=11&id=3870&extraId=2087>

