

# Primary School Teacher Candidates' Reflective Essays on the Categories That They Find Problematic When Teaching English at Primary Schools in Sweden

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## ABSTRACT:

This article comprises a mixed-methods study of primary school teacher candidates' (henceforth participants) reflections associated with the categories that they find problematic when teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at primary schools in Sweden. In this study, the participants are instructed to reflect on problematic areas of teaching EFL to young learners at Swedish primary schools and present their ideas in the form of reflective essays written in the English language. The reflective essays are written after the participants have completed their school practice sessions, having taught EFL to the Years 4–6 at primary schools in Sweden. The participants' reflective essays are analysed by means of the software program WordSmith (Scott, 2012) in order to generate a list of the most frequently used words. A qualitative component of the analysis involves the identification of a set of categories associated with the problematic areas of EFL teaching in the Years 4–6 at primary schools in Sweden. The results of the mixed-methods analysis reveal several problem areas, e.g. pronunciation, spelling, irregular verbs, adjectives, articles, vocabulary, prepositions, etc. These findings and their didactic implications for EFL teaching in the Years 4–6 at primary schools are further presented and discussed in the article.

## KEY WORDS:

English as a foreign language (EFL), EFL teaching, teacher candidates, reflective essays, primary school

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article presents an empirical study of the primary school teacher candidates' reflective essays focusing on those areas of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) which the teacher candidates (further referred to as 'participants') find problematic when teaching EFL at primary schools in Sweden. The specific aim of this study involves a mixed-methods analysis of the participants' reflective essays in order to establish the main problematic categories associated with the teaching of EFL to young learners in Years 4–6 at Swedish primary schools. The study is based upon the concept of reflection on EFL teaching practices, which plays a significant role in the conceptualisation of teacher development (Schon, 1983). The participants' reflections on the categories of teaching EFL in primary schools in Sweden are further investigated in this article by means of a mixed-methods design comprised of a computer-assisted and a qualitative methodology.



The ability to reflect is regarded as an explicit goal of teacher education and development (Baecher, 2012; Gabriel, 2017). In general terms, reflection involves the re-examination and evaluation of experience, beliefs and knowledge (Kember, McKay, Sinclair & Wong, 2008). The preparation of reflective teachers is an important theme in teacher education (Pultorak, 1993, p. 288). There is a contention that teacher candidates should understand their teaching as investigation, experimentation, and reflection (Chitpin, Simon & Galipeau, 2008, p. 2049). The teacher candidates' reflections are deemed to be a useful means of conceptualisation of the teachers' roles, goal setting, and beliefs about teaching (Myles, Cheng & Wang, 2006, p. 234), and perceptions of self-as-a-teacher (Lim, 2011). Typically, an in-service teacher's reflections are associated with curriculum facilitation, obstacles to student motivation and learning, amelioration of the students' learning experiences, etc. (Valli, 1997, p. 68).

Teacher candidates' reflections and beliefs represent a vital resource for reflecting on the processes of teaching, learning, and teaching practices (Mercer, 2017, p. 55; Myles, Cheng & Wang, 2006). Previous research suggests that a teacher's reflections can be elicited by means of a narrative inquiry in oral and written forms (Diaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2003; Hourigan & Murray, 2010). Arguably, by self-narratives, reflective essays, and blogs, teacher candidates can describe their tacit thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, fears, and hopes as they express their day-to-day understandings of their instructional contexts. Through the process of writing and reading the narrative, teachers can identify their identity-in-activity in their own words, and address any cognitive and emotional dissonance in their teaching, contradictions, and/or growth points that emerge (Golombek, 2017, p. 23).

Whilst the concept of in-service teachers' reflections appears to be well-researched (Andrews & McNeill, 2005; Golombek, 2017; Kember, McKay, Sinclair & Wong, 2008), especially in the field of Applied Linguistics and EFL, there is still insufficient research on reflective practices by teacher candidates. A novel facet of the present study involves the analysis of reflective essays on the problematic areas of teaching EFL to young learners in the Years 4–6 at primary schools in Sweden written by teacher candidates after their practice sessions at primary schools. This article is structured as follows: First, subsection 1.2. will present an overview of the existing literature pertaining to the issue of EFL teacher candidates' reflections. Second, the present study will be introduced. The study seeks to identify categories that the participants consider problematic in the teaching of EFL to young learners in the Years 4–6 whose first language (L1) is Swedish. Third, the study is concluded with possible didactic implications associated with problematic areas of EFL teaching to young learners in the Years 4–6 at primary schools in Sweden.

## 2. EFL TEACHER CANDIDATES' REFLECTIONS: LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies that address the issue of in-service teachers' reflections are well represented (Andrews & McNeill, 2005; Farrell, 1999; Gabriel, 2017; Valli, 1997). However, there is a growing interest in the study of reflective practices by teacher candidates who are preparing to teach EFL at primary and secondary schools, respec-

tively (Chien, 2017; Gan, 2013; Golombek, 2017; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003; Lim, 2011; Seferoglu, 2006; Yan & He, 2010). Previous research is indicative of a number of case studies involving written reflective practices by EFL teacher candidates (Golombek, 2017; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003). For instance, written reflections by an EFL teacher candidate with a Mexican-American background are reported to be associated with a belief and value system embedded in that teacher's experiences as a female person with the ethnic minority status (Kauchak & Burbank, 2003). Reflecting on her teaching experiences, the teacher candidate in the study by Kauchak and Burbank (2003) indicates that her professional life appears to be influenced by her personal experiences as a minority student at college. This teacher candidate's written reflections reveal the significance of her minority status in her development as a professional, which maps onto the teacher's role of protecting minority students from discriminatory practices. In doing so, the teacher focuses on making her classroom caring and accessible, especially to students with limited English proficiencies (Kauchak & Burbank, 2003).

To an extent, the study undertaken by Lim (2011) is similar to that of Kauchak and Burbank (2003) in the sense that both these studies examine the EFL teacher candidates' prior experiences, thoughts, and beliefs in relation to their professional identity formation. Lim (2011) investigates EFL teacher candidates' reflections on their own personal histories and beliefs in search of qualities comprising a good English teacher and professional expectations embraced in EFL teaching in South Korea. The study results reveal that EFL teacher candidates experience a substantial level of psychological pressure in terms of their English proficiency when they consider EFL teaching for their career (Lim, 2011, p. 979).

Self-reflective written narrative practices by an EFL teacher candidate are used to address the identification of problematic areas of teaching EFL grammar in one particular class (Golombek, 2017). It is indicated that through the process of self-inquiry and the writing of the reflective narratives, the male teacher discovers a gap between his and the students' goals in teaching EFL grammar (Golombek, 2017). Whilst the students' primary goals involve learning grammar to be able to pass an English proficiency test, the teacher candidate's goal is to teach EFL grammar in communication. Golombek (2017) indicates that the teacher candidate's self-reflective narratives facilitate the identification of the gap between that teacher candidates and the students. As a consequence of the self-reflective practices, the teacher candidate creates a curriculum unit that integrates these seemingly contradictory goals (Golombek, 2017).

Reflective essays are employed in a study by Yan and He (2010) in order to investigate the problems and observations which 210 EFL teacher candidates encountered during their teaching practice at schools in Central China. Based upon the teacher candidates' reflections, Yan and He (2010) summarise a number of common problems encountered by the teacher candidates during their school practice, e.g. tension between the expectations and reality, unreasonable time and length of teaching practice, distrust, little supervision from the supervisors, students' lack of effort in lessons preparation, and the lack of an adequate assessment system. Yan and He (2010, p. 66) suggest that teacher candidates' reflections can be used as a tool for teaching practice evaluation and professional development.





In contrast to the reflective data in Yan and He (2010), written reflections by EFL teacher candidates in Taiwan reveal positive gains in professionalism and cooperation, activity design, classroom management, and interpersonal skills development (Chien, 2017). Chien argues that reflective practices enable teacher candidates to recognise themselves as professionals in the field of EFL teaching. Reportedly, his (2017) findings provide insights into EFL school practice and suggest further integration school practice into teacher education courses.

Similarly to Yan and He (2010), a qualitative study by Seferoglu (2006) is aimed at exploring EFL teacher candidates' reflections on the methodology and practice components of a pre-service EFL teacher training programme. The reflections comprise of extensive evaluation reports concerning the methodology and practice courses taken as a part of the pre-service training. Seferoglu (2006) seeks to identify teacher candidates' experiences regarding the methodology and practice components. Seferoglu (2006) argues that a close connection between the course materials and practical application in real classrooms is absent in the methodology and practice courses. In line with these reflections, the participants suggest that there should be more opportunities for micro-teaching and practice teaching, and more observations of EFL classes conducted by different teachers at a variety of school settings (Seferoglu, 2006).

Whilst Seferoglu (2006), and Yan and He (2010) employ written reflection elicitation tasks, both oral interviews and reflective written tasks are used in a case study by Gan (2013), who analyses the teaching practice experiences of EFL teacher candidates at a university in Hong Kong. In Gan (2013), the analysis is partially composed of reflective journals, where EFL teacher candidates record both critical and routine incidents during their teaching practice. Gan (2013) posits that the teacher candidates' reflective practices indicate that the initial ideals and expectations appear to be compromised in real classroom situations. Another area of concern, evident from the teacher candidates' reflections, is classroom management. The findings in Gan (2013, p.105) reveal that the teacher candidates' English language competence tends to have an impact not only on their teaching behaviour, but also on the development of their professional identity.

The above-mentioned studies suggest that teacher candidates' reflections on their EFL teaching experiences attract substantial attention in research literature. However, little research data is available involving teacher candidates' reflections on EFL teaching to young learners in the Years 4–6 at primary schools in Sweden. The study further presented in this article seeks to address this issue by means of an empirical investigation.

### **3. TEACHER CANDIDATES' REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEMATIC AREAS OF TEACHING EFL AT SWEDISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS: HYPOTHESIS AND SPECIFIC RESEARCH AIMS**

Prior to proceeding with this study, it should be emphasised that its theoretical framework is embedded into the view of language teaching formulated by the Douglas Fir Group (2016). Within this framework, EFL teaching is regarded as situated,

multimodal, dynamic, mediated, and related to the teacher's identity (Costa & Norton, 2017). Guided by this view of EFL teaching, the present study seeks to explore the participants' reflections on the categories that they consider problematic in teaching EFL to young learners in the Years 4–6 at primary schools in Sweden. It is assumed in the hypothesis that the participants' reflective essays on the topic of their experiences of teaching EFL to primary school learners in Years 4–6 would result in the reference to a set of categories that are associated with potential difficulties in EFL teaching to young learners in Sweden. Presumably, the participants' reflective essays would be indicative of the complexities of EFL teaching embedded into the context of Swedish primary schools. Hence, the specific research aims of the present study are formulated as follows: i) to identify the most frequent words in the participants' reflective essays; ii) to identify the categories of the EFL problem areas at Swedish primary schools based on the most frequent words count and iii) to analyse the categories associated with the EFL problem areas by means of a qualitative analysis.

### 3.1. PARTICIPANTS

The participants in the study were 33 primary school teacher candidates enrolled in a teacher training programme at Stockholm University (Sweden) at the time of the experiment. The participants' real names and other identifying information were coded to ensure confidentiality. The participants' codes were PSTC1 — PSTC33 (i.e., Primary School Teacher Candidate abbreviated as PSTC and the numbers 1–33, respectively). In terms of English language proficiency, all the participants were intermediate EFL students. There were neither English/Swedish bilinguals, nor English L1 speakers in the group of participants.

All the participants attended the course of English proficiency titled '*English for school years 4–6, EN0146. Language proficiency and theory*' at Stockholm University (Sweden). That course was focused on English skills and language theory with emphasis on structures of English from a cross-linguistic perspective, spoken versus written English and language variation in the English-speaking world. The course involved grammar and vocabulary exercises to be done individually and in small study groups. At the seminars, the participants were expected to i) discuss problematic aspects of English grammar and vocabulary in relation to language theory, ii) read about and discuss common conceptions of language, with particular focus on the role of English in today's world. The course aimed at acquainting the participants with language variation in the English-speaking world and differences between spoken and written English. Other aims of the course involved the development of English skills, understanding of the language, its use and the challenges of teaching it.

### 3.2. PROCEDURE AND METHODS

After the participants finished their practice sessions at primary schools, they were asked to write a reflective essay in English titled "Problematic Areas of Teaching English to Young Learners in the Years 4–6 at Swedish Primary Schools". The participants were instructed that the essay should be approximately 400 words in length





and that it should be submitted electronically to the student portal Mondo. The participants had two weeks to complete the task. Once the participants sent in their essays, the files with the essays were collapsed into one file and analysed quantitatively in the software program WordSmith (Scott, 2012) in order to identify the most frequently used words. In accordance with Baker (2006), it was assumed in the study that the computer-assisted word frequency analysis would be suggestive of potential lexico-semantic categories to be further investigated qualitatively in the corpus of the essays. The qualitative investigation was to provide functional interpretations of the lexico-semantic categories associated with the problematic areas of EFL teaching experienced by the participants. Prior to the qualitative analysis, the data garnered from the frequent words count were reduced by omitting articles, pronouns, discourse markers, and auxiliary verbs. Then, the reduced frequent words data were subjected to the qualitative analysis in order to identify a possible range of categories associated with the problematic areas of EFL teaching. Following the methodology described by Yan and He (2010), the reflective essays were read several times in order to identify possible themes and to cluster those themes into the categories representing EFL dimensions of the participants' reflections. Then, the categories were manually checked alongside with the frequent words list.

### 3.3. DATA

The corpus of the study consisted of the participants' reflective essays titled 'Problematic Areas of Teaching English to Young Learners in the Years 4–6 at Swedish Primary Schools'. The total number of essays was 33 and the total number of words in the essays was 12,458.

### 3.4. RESULTS

The analysis of the corpus of the participants' essays in the software program WordSmith (Scott, 2012) yielded the descriptive statistics summarised in Table 1.

As previously mentioned in the description of the methods, the reflective essays were then examined qualitatively. Based upon the frequent words list, the essays were analysed qualitatively in order to identify the categories reflecting the problematic areas and dimensions of teaching English to young learners in the Years 4–6. Based upon the frequent words list presented in Table 1, several categories associated with the participants' reflections were identified in the qualitative analysis and summarised in Table 2 below.

### 3.5. DISCUSSION

As is evident from Tables 1–2, the results of the quantitative (Table 1) and qualitative (Table 2) analyses are indicative of a complex range of categories that the participants tend to associate with the teaching of EFL to young learners in Years 4–6 at Swedish primary schools. Concurring with Farrell (2008), the author of this article argues that the participants' reflective essays are influenced by their realistic school-based





Participants' Reflective Essays	Word Occurrences and Frequencies per 1,000 Words
33 essays, the total number of words 12,458	English 169 (2.5%), language 127 (1.9%), pupils 111 (1.7%), Swedish 81 (1.2%), different 62 (0.9%), teacher 61 (0.9%), learn 52 (0.8%), words 48 (0.7%), example 47 (0.7%), way 42 (0.6%), word 42 (0.6%), learners 42 (0.6%), accent 37 (0.6%), grammar 35 (0.5%), prepositions 35 (0.5%), teaching 35 (0.5%), spelling 32 (0.5%), problem 32 (0.5%), important 31 (0.5%), children 31 (0.5%), make 30 (0.5%), speak 29 (0.4%), time 26 (0.4%), people 25 (0.4%), form 25 (0.4%), learning 25 (0.4%), new 24 (0.4%), hard 24 (0.4%), difficult 23 (0.3%), need 23 (0.3%), students 22 (0.3%), pronounce 21 (0.3%), preposition 21 (0.3%), articles 21 (0.3%), correct 21 (0.3%), speaking 21 (0.3%), school 20 (0.3%), verbs 20 (0.3%), noun 19 (0.3%), sound 19 (0.3%), present 18 (0.3%), writing 18 (0.3%), pronunciation 18 (0.3%), grade 18 (0.3%), know 18 (0.3%), languages 17 (0.3%), good 17 (0.3%), spell 17 (0.3%), work 17 (0.3%), verb 16 (0.2%), past 16 (0.2%), understand 16 (0.2%), class 16 (0.2%), irregular 16 (0.2%), teach 15 (0.2%), start 14 (0.2%), rules 14 (0.2%), accents 14 (0.2%), sounds 13 (0.2%), find 13 (0.2%), problematic 13 (0.2%), simple 13 (0.2%), differences 13 (0.2%), write 12 (0.2%), meaning 13 (0.2%), problems 13 (0.2%), proper 12 (0.2%), see 12 (0.2%), article 12 (0.2%), thing 12 (0.2%), pupil 11 (0.2%), sentences 11 (0.2%), say 11 (0.2%), properly 11 (0.2%), adjectives 11 (0.2%), speech 11 (0.2%), person 10 (0.2%), hear 10 (0.2%), read 10 (0.2%), vocabulary 10 (0.2%), grammatical 9 (0.1%), practice 9 (0.1%), reason 9 (0.1%), activity 9 (0.1%), knowledge 9 (0.1%), specific 9 (0.1%), talk 9 (0.1%), dialects 9 (0.1%), areas 9 (0.1%), pronounced 8 (0.1%), tend 8 (0.1%), role 8 (0.1%), using 8 (0.1%), adjective 8 (0.1%), compared 8 (0.1%), examples 8 (0.1%), vowel 8 (0.1%), teachers 8 (0.1%), adverb 7 (0.1%), nouns 7 (0.1%), participle 7 (0.1%), tense 7 (0.1%), spelt 7 (0.1%), homophones 6 (0.1%), translate 6 (0.1%), vowels 6 (0.1%), reading 6 (0.1%), tell 6 (0.1%), spoken 6 (0.1%), consonant 6 (0.1%), regular 6 (0.1%)

**TABLE 1:** The Most Frequent Words per 1,000 words.

experiences, which encompass a diverse set of categories that involve, for instance, English pronunciation, spelling, irregular verbs, and an EFL learner's background (see Table 2). The results of the mixed-methods analysis reveal that the participants identify two sets of categories, which they found challenging in their teaching practice sessions at school, i.e. i) language competency-related categories, and ii) non-language competency-related categories. The language competency-related categories comprise the following problem areas: pronunciation, spelling, irregular verbs, adjectives, articles, vocabulary, prepositions, adverbs, tense, pronouns, and plural nouns. The non-language competency-related categories include the EFL learner's background, parental support, insufficient motivation, and teaching methods.

This study appears to support the contention by Andrews and McNeill (2005) that a 'good' EFL teacher should possess a clear conception of the language content in their own pedagogical practice. The present data seem to indicate that the participants are aware of the challenges to EFL teaching posed by the language content, since they identify such EFL-related categories as pronunciation, spelling, irregular verbs,



#	Problematic Areas of Teaching English to Young Learners in the Years 4–6	Total Number of the Participants' Essays Containing the Category and its Percentage
1.	Pronunciation	14 (42%)
2.	Spelling	8 (24%)
3.	Irregular Verbs	7 (21%)
4.	Learners' Background	6 (18%)
5.	Adjectives	5 (15%)
6.	Articles	5 (15%)
7.	Vocabulary	5 (15%)
8.	Prepositions	4 (12%)
9.	Parental Support	3 (9%)
10.	Tense	3 (9%)
11.	Teaching Methods	2 (6%)
12.	Insufficient Motivation	2 (6%)
13.	Adverb	1 (3%)
14.	Plural Nouns	1 (3%)
15.	Pronouns	1 (3%)

**TABLE 2:** The Categories Associated with the Problematic Areas of Teaching of English to Young Learners in the Years 4–6 at Swedish Primary Schools.

adjectives, articles, vocabulary, prepositions, adverbs, tense, pronouns, and plural nouns. In addition to the language-related issues, the participants' reflections suggest that they are conscious of several categories that are not directly language-related (for instance, EFL learner's background, parental support, insufficient motivation, and teaching methods).

Presumably, the heterogeneity of the qualitative findings stems from the realistic nature of the participants' experiences. This assumption is supported by previous research (Farrell, 2008; Gan, 2013; Watzke, 2007), which indicates that teacher candidates' reflections during and after their school practice are highly dynamic and are associated with multiple variables involved in classroom experiences and classroom contexts. Whilst the heterogeneity of problematic areas of EFL teaching to young learners in Years 4–6 is observed in the present data, it is, nevertheless, possible to assume that pronunciation (identified in 42% of all essays) is considered among the principle challenges of EFL teaching. Regarding English pronunciation, a male participant coded PSTC8 refers to the English sounds that are absent in the Swedish language, thus making them difficult to teach to the young EFL learners whose L1 is Swedish:

- (1) *The consonants <sh> and <ch> do not exist in Swedish. The sounds of the consonants will therefore be very hard for the young learners to pronounce but with some speaking exercises they will learn how to pronounce them and they will also learn that they are spelt with more than one consonant. (Participant PSTC8)*





Interestingly, in Excerpt (1) the participant identifies another area of concern, namely English spelling: ‘...they will also learn that they are **spelt** with more than one consonant.’ (PSTC8). Similar reflections associated with English spelling are identified in 24% of the participants’ reflective essays, as seen in Excerpt 2:

(2) *Another complex thing in the English language is the empty letter, it is there when you spell it, but you do not pronounce it; the opposite of the silent letter. Such as knife, know, knee, etc. Therefore it would be understandable why some pupils would spell the word know as now instead. When teaching young learners, you can compare this to the Swedish language. And inform them about the similarities that we have in both languages. An example you can give when doing that is the word ljus, when you pronounce it, you do not pronounce the letter /l/, you pronounce it as jus. So it is a good example to show your pupils to get an insight into these two similarities.* (Participant PSTC2)

It should be observed that the problem posed by English spelling appears to be rather frequent in the participants’ reflective essays, for example, the word frequency data reveal that the word *spelling* is employed 32 times (0.5%) per 1000 words, *spell* 17 (0.3%), *writing* 18 (0.3%), and *write* (0.2%). Specifically in (2), it is evident that the participant identifies English spelling as a problem and reflects upon the means of solving the problem by suggesting a comparison between English and the Swedish language, for example ‘*When teaching young learners, you can compare this to the Swedish language.*’ (Participant PSTC2). As indicated by Kömür (2010, p. 292), it is laudable that the participants can identify problematic areas of their EFL teaching and, upon reflection, develop strategies to cope with the problems. Excerpt (2) provides a pertinent illustration of such a strategy.

Similar to Excerpt (2), the participants’ problem solving capacity is manifested in several reflective essays, especially in those where they identify the problem of EFL teaching posed by English irregular verbs. Specifically, in 21% of the essays irregular verbs are considered a problem in the participants’ EFL teaching. The quantitative word frequencies support this finding (the word *irregular* is used 16 times (0.2%) and the frequency of the word *verb* 16 (0.2%) per 1000 words), as seen in Excerpt (3) below:

(3) *Learners make two frequent errors with irregular verbs. They either add an incorrect -ed to the end of an irregular verb or accidentally interchange the simple past and past participle. I would teach this to 5th graders: Give the pupils a sheet with instructions that says “Make sentences in English of following verbs in present tense, past tense, and when something has happened (past participle). Ex: I come from Sweden (Jag kommer från Sverige). My friend came to visit me from Norway. (Min vän kom för att besöka mig från Norge). I wish you had come earlier. (Jag önskar att du hade kommit tidigare).* (Participant PSTC23)

In (3), the participant reflects on the problem area associated with the irregular verbs in English, analyses it, and offers a practical solution to solve the problem, e.g. ‘*I would*



teach this to 5th graders: Give the pupils a sheet with instructions that says “Make sentences in English of following verbs in present tense, past tense... (PSTC23).

The results of the data analysis reveal that the following three areas are equally distributed in the participants’ reflective essays: adjectives (15%), articles (15%), and vocabulary (15%). These problem areas are associated with such frequently used words as *articles* 21 (0.3%), *article* 12 (0.2%), *adjectives* 11 (0.2%), *adjective* 8 (0.1%), and *vocabulary* 10 (0.2%). As indicated by a female participant, teaching ‘rules about adjectives might be hard because they are modified by nouns in Swedish, for example, *en stor bil, ett stort hus, and flera stora bilar/hus. Adjectives do not behave this way in English.*’ (PSTC29). The participants’ reflections upon the contrast between the English language and Swedish and its impact upon the participants’ EFL teaching can be taken to indicate that the participants have sufficient and competent EFL mastery. As pointed out by Gan (2013), the non-native EFL pre-service teachers’ command of English affects their self-image as professionals, and their teaching. This contention implies that a high level of EFL competence is required for successful and positive outcomes of the teacher candidates’ school practice. Judging from the data analysis further illustrated by Excerpts (4), (5), and (6) the participants in this study appear to be linguistically confident in their mastery of the English language, which allows them to draw parallels and contrasts between linguistic properties of the English and Swedish languages:

- (4) *Some students of English might transfer their knowledge about articles in Swedish to the English language. For example, a student might know that en bil is a car and they might then think that ett hus is an house, that en is a and that ett is an.* (Participant PSTC15)
- (5) *The pupils have problems with English prepositions. First of all, there are so many more prepositions in English than in a lot of other languages. Swedish learners often make the mistake of translating directly from Swedish, for example: He was at the festival (not on the festival, which would likely be the direct translation from Swedish).* (Participant PSTC7)
- (6) *One reason why this is so hard for Swedish pupils is that there is no set form in English. Definiteness is expressed by the definite article (bil**en** — the car). Thus, there are some differences as to bending categories and congruence and syntax. However, if you explain this to your students, the differences, they can begin to relate and solve the problem, learn to think in two languages. If you start doing this in fifth grade you can create a platform to continue to solve grammatical problems in your classroom.* (Participant PSTC33)

The results of the data analysis indicate that concurrently with the language-related problems of EFL teaching (e.g. prepositions, adverbs, tense, pronouns, and plural nouns), the participants’ reflections are suggestive of certain non-language-related problems involved in their EFL teaching experiences. Specifically, these problems are associated with the learner’s background, teaching methods, paren-

tal support, and insufficient motivation. The learner's multicultural background is regarded as a challenge to EFL teaching by a number of participants, as seen in Excerpts (7)-(8):

- (7) *My first language is Bosnian (Slavic), second language Swedish (Germanic) and third is English. It is not easy for a person who speaks a Slavic language to learn a Germanic one because they are so different from each other. It is easier for a Bosnian speaking person to learn for example Polish than English, and a Swedish speaking person can more easily learn German or English than Polish. The main reason to this is that the vocabularies have so many similarities in both form and content in the related languages. So it is easier to learn English if your first language is Swedish, and that I believe can be very difficult these days since Sweden is such a multicultural country with children from all around the world. It will certainly be a challenge as a future teacher when more and more pupils in class have other first languages than Swedish, or a Germanic language at all. People in my surrounding have this problem, that why I will put all my energy in these pupils from day one, since I now see what a problem it is for these persons.* (Participant PSTC3)
- (8) *Sweden is a multi-cultural society with immigrants from all over the world. Some of these children will have a hard time learning English. A pupil who has Arabic as his first language will struggle with learning Swedish. On top of that he is supposed to learn a third language. Of course a native Swede will find it easier to learn English, both because English is more similar to Swedish and because the pupil doesn't have to struggle with two different first languages. Teachers must show understanding and patience with the pupils who are finding a language difficult. Maybe there is an underlying reason to the language obstacles.* (Participant PST16)

Excerpts (7) and (8) are evocative of the findings reported by Kauchak and Burbank (2003), who indicate that the teacher candidate's ethnic minority status maps onto the teacher's role of protecting minority students. Note, for instance, that in (7) the participant with a Bosnian background reflects on the role of her L1 (Bosnian) and applies her reflections to the context of EFL acquisition by the primary school EFL learners with minority status. The participant emphasises that *'I will put all my energy in these pupils from day one, since I now see what a problem it is for these persons.'* (Participant PSTC3). These reflections are echoed by another participant in Excerpt (8), who argues that in Sweden there are young EFL learners with immigrant backgrounds who experience difficulties with EFL acquisition and, consequently, *'Teachers must show understanding and patience with the pupils who are finding a language difficult.'* (Participant PSTC16).

As indicated by Cowie (2011), an EFL professional's life involves relationships with students, colleagues, parents and other individuals connected to the institutions that they work in (Cowie, 2011). The present data seem to support Cowie's (2011) observation. The learners' relationships with their parents in relation to the EFL teaching are mentioned in 9% of reflective essays, as illustrated by Excerpt (9):





- (9) *... it is important that the pupils' parents support their children together with the teacher. What the children/pupils are going through will affect them for the rest of their life so it is important that they are having a great experience when they are learning new things, and in this example learning a new language (PST1, female)*

The present findings reveal that the pupils' rapport with the parents seems to be important, e.g. '*it is important that the pupils' parents support their children together with the teacher*' (PSTC1). In contrast, previous studies on teacher candidates' reflections do not appear to focus on this variable, instead they foreground such variables as the school as an institution, teaching co-ordinators, framework conditions of the school practice sessions, and classroom management issues (Kömür, 2010; Seferogly, 2006; Yan & He, 2010). The afore-mentioned variables have not been identified in the present study. Presumably, the absence of criticism towards the school system and the teaching institutions is suggestive of the participants' satisfaction with their school teaching practice. Whilst the participants appear to be satisfied with their teaching practice, they nevertheless reflect upon the EFL learners' insufficient motivation which the participants encountered during their teaching experiences, for example.

- (10) *The pupils in Sweden today are being more and more lazy, for each day that goes. Not just on their spare time, but also in school and during class. At their spare time, they are spending more and more time indoor than outdoor and in front of the computer and videogames then socializing together with their friends in real life. Everything today has to be done by and on the computer — their assignments as well. More and more schools are using laptops and ipad's in the classroom and the pupils are not writing as they once did. The spelling is getting worse, because of the spelling-check that is on laptops, I believe that the pupils are getting very used to the computer correcting their mistakes automatically. The pupils today are writing abbreviations on so many words or a mix between English and Swedish, so that they actually believe that it is a real word. I notices this for a couple of days ago when I visited my VFU-school to observe a English lesson. The pupils did not talk English with the teacher, they mostly talked Swedish, but with a twist of English sometimes. (Participant PSTC11)*

In (10), the participant reflects on her personal observations associated with the lack of motivation on the part of the EFL learners. It is implied in (10) that insufficient motivation during the class stems from the extensive usage of information technology, which, in turn, leads to problems with spelling, for instance '*The spelling is getting worse, because of the spelling-check that is on laptops, I believe that the pupils are getting very used to the computer correcting their mistakes automatically*'. (Participant PSTC11). Additionally, the participant reflects upon the EFL learners' insufficient motivation to engage in conversation in English, e.g. '*...when I visited my VFU-school to observe a English lesson. The pupils did not talk English with the teacher, they mostly talked Swedish, but with a twist of English sometimes.*' (PSTC11).

## CONCLUSIONS AND DIDACTIC IMPLICATIONS

This article introduces a mixed-methods study in order to analyse the participants' reflective essays on the topic of problematic areas of EFL teaching at Swedish primary schools. The novelty of the present study stems from the reflective essays' focus on teaching EFL to the Years 4–6 of primary school. The analysis of the reflective essays is based on the most frequently used words computed by the software program WordSmith (Scott, 2012) and on the qualitative component of the data analysis which involves the identification of a set of categories associated with the problematic areas of EFL teaching at Swedish primary schools. The results of the mixed-methods analysis reveal that the participants identify two sets of categories, which they find challenging in their teaching practice sessions at school, i) language competency-related categories and ii) non-language competency-related categories. The language competency-related categories comprise the following problem areas: pronunciation, spelling, irregular verbs, adjectives, articles, vocabulary, prepositions, adverbs, tense, pronouns, and plural nouns. The non-language competency-related categories include the EFL learner's background, parental support, insufficient motivation, and teaching methods.

Whilst the present case study has a limited number of participants, it is, nevertheless, possible to summarise the present findings into a number of didactic and pedagogical suggestions. First, it can be generally said that the participants' reflections are focused on the following, most frequently mentioned, EFL problem areas: pronunciation, spelling, irregular verbs, adjectives, articles and vocabulary. According to the participants, these problem areas posed challenges to their teaching of the Years 4–6 during the practice sessions at primary schools. Arguably, the teacher training programmes should factor in a more specific focus on teaching methodology to facilitate the participants' concerns with the teaching of pronunciation, spelling, word classes and vocabulary. Second, the data analysis indicates that the set of non-language competency-related categories does not include negative reflections associated with the school as an institution, teaching co-ordinators, the framework conditions of the school practice sessions, and classroom management. These findings are suggestive of an adequately organised school teaching practice. However, issues regarding the EFL learner's background, parental support, insufficient motivation, and teaching methods should be, perhaps, dealt with more detail within the participants' course of study.

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