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Teachers' Perceptions of Second Language Learning and  
Teaching

—

A Comparison of Two Groups of English Teachers

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## **Abstract**

The study of teachers and students' perceptions of second language acquisition (SLA) and teaching began in earnest with Horwitz's seminal research during the 1980s. Numerous studies into both teachers and learners' belief systems have since then been conducted by researchers and educators (Bell, 2005; Borg & Burns, 2008; Brown, 2009; Davis, 2003; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009; Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Peacock, 1999; Schulz, 1996, 2001; Vasquez & Harvey, 2010). Many of the studies point to large differences not only between students and teachers' belief systems but also amongst teachers themselves, making it important to continue to research their perceptions of second language learning and teaching.

This particular essay explores two groups of teachers, teaching in Europe, and their beliefs about SLA and teaching. The data were collected using a 16-item 4-point Likert-scale questionnaire that 24 teachers responded to. Based on current research about SLA and teaching, various points of interests such as age, the role of grammar, and learning an L1 versus an L2, were identified for inclusion in the questionnaire. The results are examined overall as well as being compared between the two groups. Furthermore, the present study also investigates how the results are linked to that of current knowledge about language learning and teaching based on SLA research. The findings show that the teachers, overall, are often aware of the current knowledge about SLA and teaching but in some instances they hold opposing views. Moreover, the results also show that there are differences between the two groups in areas such as grammar teaching and error correction.

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## **1. Introduction**

The study of teachers and students' perceptions of second language learning and teaching began in earnest with Horwitz's seminal research during the 1980s. Numerous studies into both teachers and learners' belief systems have since then been conducted by researchers and educators (Bell, 2005; Borg & Burns, 2008; Brown, 2009; Davis, 2003; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009; Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Peacock, 1999; Schulz, 1996, 2001; Vasquez & Harvey, 2010). Many of the studies point to large differences not only between students and teachers' belief systems but also amongst teachers themselves, making it important to continue to research their perceptions of second language learning and teaching. Researching teachers and students' beliefs concerning this aspect is vital since both groups' ideas and perceptions affect language teaching and learning (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004, p. 245; Bell, 2005, p. 260; Peacock, 1999, p. 247-248; Schulz, 2001, p. 245).

This essay explores teachers' beliefs about second language learning and teaching. It focuses on two different groups of English teachers: one consisting of native English-speakers teaching English in Poland and one of non-native English-speakers teaching English in Sweden. The results are examined overall as well as being compared between the two groups. Furthermore, the present study also investigates how the results are linked to that of current knowledge about language learning and teaching based on second language acquisition<sup>1</sup> research (Borg & Burns, 2008; Schulz, 2001; Vásquez & Harvey, 2010).

This essay has six sections. Following the introduction, the next section presents key issues, such as, language learning and age; the use of grammar, and corrective feedback; and learners' as well as teachers' beliefs, within second language learning and teaching as they relate to aspects covered in the questionnaire used in the present study. Then, in section three, the choice of method is explained, and the respondents are presented, as is the procedure of data collection and analysis. The results of the questionnaire are presented in section four, firstly for all participating teachers and subsequently for the two groups, thus allowing for a comparison. Moreover, in the following section, the results are discussed in depth in relation to current knowledge about language teaching and learning, which is based on research within the field of second language acquisition. In addition, the results of the two participating groups are compared. Section six concludes the essay with an overall presentation of the findings, limitations of the present study, and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Key Issues in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching**

The present section presents empirical studies, pertinent to this essay, that have been conducted within the vast field of second language learning and teaching. The first subsection introduces the broad differences and similarities between learning a first language and a second one and connects language learning with age. The following subsection concerns the use of corrective feedback in second language classrooms and presents current theories within this area. Subsection 2.3 looks at studies regarding grammar learning and teaching and explains how this has evolved during the past century. This section concludes with subsections 2.4 and 2.5 which introduce the background on issues such as students and teachers' beliefs about second language learning and teaching, respectively. There are other important topics in second language acquisition (SLA) research but the ones chosen here are key issues within the field. The reasons for choosing these particular issues are twofold: firstly, a number of studies have been conducted about the key issues chosen thus providing ample research to draw from, and, secondly all five issues are controversial in some aspects as researchers within a particular area have either provided conflicting results, or these results have not yet had an impact on language teaching (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

### **2.1 Language Learning and the Age Factor**

The prevailing theory about how children learn a first language was for many years the belief in learning by imitation (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 15). However, this changed with Chomsky's claim, in the late 1950s, that human beings are born with the capacity to learn a language, that is, it is an innate or natural ability that all human beings have (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 12; Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 13-14). Nowadays, the belief of an innate ability of learning one's L1(s) is taken for granted (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 13).

This changed belief spawned a multitude of studies into child acquisition and many of these have concerned children's metalinguistic awareness (Chaney, 1992, p.485). "The term 'metalinguistic' has been used to describe a wide range of linguistic skills, such as [...] separating words from their referents, judging the semantic and syntactic appropriateness of sentences, and so on" (Chaney, 1992, p. 485). Several studies have shown that two-year-olds are knowledgeable about the word order of the L1(s) they are learning (Herschensohn, 2009, p. 263-64). Furthermore, they can differentiate between expressions such as 'Ball me the bring' and 'Bring me the ball' as being silly or not (Chaney, 1992, p. 500; Sinclair, 1986, p.

612). Children know about aspects like these regardless of whichever language(s) they are learning as their L1(s) without ever having taken a single class in the language(s).

Over the past decades, more and more researchers, according to Herschensohn (2009), have studied child second language acquisition to learn whether the acquisition process is similar to adult L2 or to L1 acquisition (p. 264-265). Several studies indicate that in some aspects, inflectional morphology for example, child L2 learning is similar to L1 acquisition but in other areas, like syntax, it is similar to adult L2 learning (Herschensohn, 2009; Unsworth, 2004). Moreover, adult SLA also shares characteristics with L1 acquisition (Herschensohn, 2009, p. 264). However, the pace with which child L2 learners acquire inflectional morphology is much slower compared to the rapid learning of L1 children (Herschensohn, 2009, p. 266).

When discussing child L1, child L2 and adult L2 learning, age is an important factor. The matter is understandable especially when looking at how much better young learners of a second language perform phonetically compared to adult learners (Singleton, 2005). Furthermore, a discussion about age and language learning would be incomplete without mentioning the critical period or the critical period hypothesis (CPH). Originally based on biology, adherents to the CPH claim that native-like attainment of an L2 is impossible after a certain age, usually puberty. However, a number of researchers have questioned the CPH and claim that many adolescents and adult learners do attain native-like proficiency in their chosen L2 (Herschenson, 2009; Unsworth, 2004; Van Boxtel, Bongaerts & Coppens, 2005).

In his review of the counter-evidence of the CPH, Long (2005) claims that none of the empirical studies he reviewed disproved the CPH as their methods were flawed. Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam (2009) make similar claims in their paper, arguing that previous studies have not been stringent enough (p. 258-259). However, Birdsong (2005) makes a valid point when he says that a line has to be drawn somewhere or L2 learners who have achieved native-like attainment will be “subjected to even further poking and prodding, until a betraying shibboleth is found” (p. 322). Furthermore, Singleton (2005) claims the fact that there are so many “diverse and competing versions of the Critical Period Hypothesis [...] undermines its plausibility” (p. 269). It is clear that the debate about the CPH and how age impacts second language learning will rage on, especially in light of the many conflicting findings presented by researchers within the field.

The belief in the CPH has affected language teaching, and during the past fifty years many different language programs have been implemented; one of the more long-lived and successful ones is the immersion program (Håkansson, 2003, p. 191). These programs were

originally initiated by English-speaking parents in Quebec who wanted their children to speak French as well and as fluently as they spoke English (Håkansson, 2003, p. 190; MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011, p. 82). The main feature in all immersion programs is that students learn subject matter via their chosen L2 (Spada & Lightbown, 2002, p. 212). There are variations of immersion programs such as early ones where the children begin in kindergarten; middle immersion programs where the pupils begin in grade 4 or 5, and late ones where the learners begin in grade 7 (Håkansson, 2003, p. 190; MacIntyre et al, 2011, p. 82; Peirce, Swain, & Hart, 1993, p. 27-28). The students in these programs show high levels of fluency, well-developed listening skills and confidence in using their L2 (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 172; Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 40).

However, despite the success of the programs both educators and researchers have expressed concern over immersion learners' apparent lack of native-like attainment concerning a number of grammatical and lexical aspects despite spending years in the immersion program (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 40; Spada & Lightbown, 2002, p. 213-214). Researchers who have investigated this suggest that learners are unaware of whether the teacher means to correct meaning or form, and in subject matter classes, language errors are often overlooked over content (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 57; Spada & Lightbown, 2002, p. 213-214). Furthermore, some researchers have argued that immersion programs are "most successful for middle-class students from majority or prestige language backgrounds" (Spada & Lightbown, 2002, p. 213).

## 2.2 Grammar in Second Language Learning

The role of grammar in the language classroom has varied greatly during the past hundred years or so. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the so-called grammar-translation method was prevalent (Bell, 2005, p. 260). The use of explicitly learned grammatical rules as well as grammatical analysis and translation from L1 to L2 were common features in this approach (Bell, 2005, p. 260).

The audio-lingual approach, prevalent during the decades in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, also had a strong grammatical component (Bell, 2005, p. 260). In this approach, there was a focus on accuracy over communication, and on direct and immediate negative feedback to learners' errors (Bell, 2005, p. 260; Schulz, 1996, p. 343).

The communicative approach to second language learning, which emerged during the 1970s, shifted the focus on to the communicative aspect of learning a second language, that



is, the learners should not only be able to read and write in their chosen L2 but above all, be able to interact with others using their second language (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 156-157). The shift from more grammar-based approaches to the communicative approach led to less focus on explicit grammar teaching and error correction.

However, many scholars and educators believe that a focus on meaning over form is detrimental to students' learning (Schulz, 1996, p. 344). To help learners change their interlanguage, that is, a learner's developing language of their chosen L2, towards a more native-like speech with a higher degree of accuracy, a number of studies have shown that explicit grammar instruction and a focus on form are paramount (Lyster, 1994, 2004; Spada & Lightbown, 1999; White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991). Students who receive explicit grammar instruction not only outperform those students who did not, but also retain the language features learned over time (Lyster, 1994, 2004; Spada & Lightbown, 1999; White, Spada, Lightbown & Ranta, 1991).

When looking at how learners' interlanguage develops, researchers have shown that L2 learners, with different L1s, go through the same developmental sequences in, for example, morphology and syntax (Spada & Lightbown, 1999; Herschensohn, 2009; Schwartz, 2003; Unsworth, 2004). Furthermore, these sequences share some characteristics with the acquisition of L1 learners of the language in question as well (Spada & Lightbown, 1999; Herschensohn, 2009; Schwartz, 2003; Unsworth, 2004). Additionally, research has shown that learners' L1s also have an impact on L2 developmental stages (Håkansson, Pienemann, Sayehli, 2002, p. 256; Spada & Lightbown, 1999, p. 16-17). However, the influence seems to vary, as there are studies that have shown little L1 influence (Håkansson et al, 2002, p. 256); whilst other studies have produced the opposite results (Spada & Lightbown, 1999, p. 16-17).

To answer the observed fact that students do not always learn what they are taught, Pienemann, drawing on research into developmental stages, introduced the teachability hypothesis (Pienemann, 1989). The hypothesis "does not predict that teaching has no influence whatsoever on acquisition" but rather that "teaching can only promote acquisition by presenting what is learnable at a given point in time" (Pienemann, 1989, p. 63).

### 2.3 The Use of Corrective Feedback in the Second Language Classroom

The use of error correction has taken many forms in the second language classroom over the years. Corrective feedback played a major role in both the grammar-translation method as well as in the audio-lingual approach (Bell, 2005, p. 260; Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 126).

Students learned grammar rules of the target language and error correction was limited to this area.

When the communicative approach gained in prominence, the use of corrective feedback in second language classrooms decreased, as did grammar instruction, as previously mentioned (Schulz, 1996, p. 343). However, researchers have claimed that this is not a road teachers and educators should travel as increasing evidence has shown that corrective feedback promotes second language learning (Schulz, 1996, p. 344). Furthermore, White argues “learners sometimes need information not only about what is possible in the L2 (i.e., positive evidence) but also information about what is not possible (i.e., negative evidence)” (as cited in Spada & Lightbown, 1999, p 17).

In an influential study, Lyster & Ranta (1997) connected types of corrective feedback used by teachers to that of learner uptake (p. 42). Generally speaking, six types of corrective feedback have been identified, namely: recasts (teacher rephrases the error in a correct way without explicitly saying so), elicitation (teacher elicits the correct answer from the student), clarification requests (teacher asks for clarification of error), metalinguistic feedback (teacher explains the error using e.g. grammar), explicit correction and repetition together with two types of learner uptake: repair (repetition and incorporation by self or peer) and needs-repair (attempts at repair but inadequately done) (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 53-54; Panova & Lyster, 2002, p. 576; Vasquez & Harvey, 2010, p. 425, 439).

From a learner uptake point of view, elicitation is the most successful technique, closely followed by metalinguistic feedback, especially when it comes to repair; clarification requests and repetition are also fairly successful techniques leading to learner uptake (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 54). However, the most common feedback technique used by teachers was recasts and it lead to the least of any kind of uptake (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 54). Subsequent studies have corroborated that recasts are among the most commonly used corrective feedback techniques despite leading to little or no learner uptake (Panova & Lyster, 2002, p. 573; Vasquez & Harvey, 2010, p. 432-433). Moreover, in support of other types of corrective feedback than recasts, Lasagabaster & Sierra (2009) point out that, firstly, a student must know that he or she has been corrected, and secondly, he or she needs to be aware of “the nature of the correction” (p. 125).

However, other researchers have found that recasts facilitate language learning (Goo & Mackey, 2013, p. 130). Factors mentioned in support of recasts include: students who are proficient to a high degree are more sensitive to corrective feedback in general and, therefore, more likely to notice recasts than lower level learners; the amount of changes in a recast as

well as length and intonation matter; and short and/or partial recasts are also easier to notice for students (Goo & Mackey, 2013, p. 130).

It is impossible to discuss students' errors without addressing the role of transfer from a student's L1. Until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, errors in SLA were considered to be due to transfer from a learner's L1, but studies showed that learners produced errors that could not be explained as transfer from their L1s (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 41-42). Moreover, research into developmental sequences has shown that transfer from students' L1s is only one aspect of learners' errors in second language learning (Håkansson et al, 2002, p. 256; Spada & Lightbown, 1999, p. 16-17).

Second language classrooms often employ the use of pair or small group work, for both pedagogical and theoretical reasons, one being to ensure that learners have more oral output (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 207, 221; McDonough, 2004, p. 207). A concern has been that the quality of student output would decrease, as teachers would not be able to monitor all the students at the same time thus not engaging in error correction to a large extent (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 223; McDonough, 2004, p. 210). Many educators and researcher have been especially concerned about settings where non-native speakers (NNS) engage in pair or group work with other NNSs, which is the most common situation in second language learning classrooms (Long & Porter, 1985; McDonough, 2004). However, studies show evidence to the contrary; when NNSs engage in what is commonly referred to as interlanguage talk, the quality of the target language does not decrease, rather the opposite (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 214).

Long & Porter (1985) refers to a study carried out by Long et al as early as 1976, which showed that "students not only talked more, but also used a wider range of speech acts in the small group context" compared to teacher-led discussions (p. 215). Other studies have later corroborated these findings again showing that learners produce more speech when talking to each other than to native-speaker partners (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 215).

The teachers in McDonough's (2004) study showed concern about not being able to monitor everybody in the class as well as whether oral activities were actually useful for the production of the target language (p. 210). The students in the study also did not feel that the oral pair and small group activities were useful for learning English (McDonough, 2004, p. 221). However, McDonough's (2004) study showed the exact opposite: learners increased their production of correct target forms both in immediate and delayed production (p. 220). A majority of the students in the study did not believe that oral activities helped with grammar production (McDonough, 2004, p. 222). These results, as well as other, show that teachers

and students who fear that not only will the students fail to improve on the target language in question but also possibly copy each other's errors are gravely mistaken (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 221).

#### 2.4 Learners' Beliefs about Second Language Learning and Teaching

A majority of people have opinions about language learning and teaching in general and of second language learning and teaching in particular (Horwitz, 1987, p. 119; 1988, p. 283). That learners enter the second language classroom with preconceived ideas and expectations about second language learning seems certain and that these influence learners and ultimately may be the difference between success or failure as a language student is a certainty (Horwitz, 1987, p. 19-20).

In her seminal work on students and teachers' beliefs about language learning, Horwitz (1987, 1988) created, and used the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a 34-item Likert scale questionnaire, with both students and teachers alike as a way to assess students and teachers' opinions on issues related to language learning (p. 120; p. 284). One of the first large-scale studies (241 students at University of Texas) using the BALLI showed that many language learners hold beliefs that most educators and researchers would claim are detrimental to the students' learning (Horwitz, 1988, p. 286). A substantial number (more than forty percent) of the students partaking in the survey believed that if someone studied for one hour every day, they would become fluent in their target language within two years or less (Horwitz, 1988, p. 286). Another BALLI item states: "Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 288). In a small-scale study (32 ESL students in Texas) more than half of the respondents agreed with this and in the large-scale study one third of the respondents agreed whilst another third neither agreed nor disagreed (Horwitz, 1987, p. 123-124; Horwitz, 1988, p. 288).

A decade later, Peacock (1999) used the BALLI in another large-scale study (202 students in Hong Kong); forty percent of this group also believed that if someone studied for one hour every day, they would become fluent in their target language within two years or less (p. 254). A staggering sixty-four percent of Peacock's students agreed that language learning is mostly about learning grammar rules (Peacock, 1999, p. 257). It is worth pointing out that the students in Horwitz's study spoke an Indo-European language, that is, English, and studied German, French or Spanish, also Indo-European languages, whereas the students

in Peacock's study spoke Chinese, a Sino-Tibetan language, but studied English, a language from a completely different language family thus possibly making grammar rules more important (Horwitz 1988:285; Peacock 1999:251).

Horwitz (1987; 1988) claims that many teachers meet students who complain when every single error they make is not corrected (p. 119; p. 290). The student belief that teachers should correct every utterance a learner makes still seems to hold; when Brown (2009) compared what learners and their teachers (ca 1,600 students and 49 teachers) thought of 'what constitutes an effective teacher', the questionnaire item concerning an effective teacher's immediate response to error is the item that shows the biggest significant difference of all the 24 items on the questionnaire (p. 50-51, 54). To clarify, students believe that an effective teacher should correct every error immediately whereas teachers do not.

Moreover, in Davis's (2003) comparative study of teachers and learners' perceptions of second language learning and teaching (18 teachers and 97 students), seventy-one percent of the students believed that teachers should correct learners when they make grammatical errors (p. 212). Furthermore, eighty-seven percent of the learners agreed with the following questionnaire item: "students' errors should be corrected as soon as they are made in order to prevent the formation of bad habits" (Davis, 2003, p. 213). In Schulz's (1996; 2001) two studies (824 students; 607 students) the language learners also showed a preference for having spoken errors corrected (p. 346-347; p. 253). Schulz's (1996; 2001) studies also revealed that a majority of students were in favor of explicit grammar teaching (p. 348; p. 254). Brown (2009) presented corroborating results concerning learners' preference for grammar instruction (p. 53).

The fact that all of these studies present the same result regarding several issues, despite being conducted many years apart and in different parts of the world, indicates that certain perceptions held by learners are difficult to change. That a number of the perceptions held by students concerning language learning are directly detrimental to their learning is something that has been pointed out by researchers for years (Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Brown, 2009; Davis, 2003; Peacock, 1999; Schulz, 1996, 2001). Studies into languages learners' belief systems about language learning present a strong argument that for the benefit of everybody in the language classroom, teachers should find out what their students believe about language learning (Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Brown, 2009; Davis, 2003; Peacock, 1999; Schulz, 1996, 2001).

## 2.5 Teachers' Beliefs about Second Language Learning and Teaching

Language teachers, like their students, have strong perceptions about SLA and L2 pedagogy, which makes it worthwhile to research. Brown (2009) mentions Pajares and states that “[he] claimed that beliefs about teaching are formulated through many years of formal schooling and that they may be difficult to alter” (p.47). In the long run it is of great importance to ensure that teachers become as aware of their belief system regarding second language learning and teaching, and of their students’, as it is for learners to become aware of theirs as both systems have ramifications on the outcome of not only the learning taking place but also the teaching (Bell, 2005, p. 259; Brown, 2009, p. 55).

In her comprehensive study, which was comprised of 80 questionnaire items and had 457 respondents, Bell (2005) looked at teachers’ ideas of what constitutes an effective teacher (p. 261). The study focused on teachers’ perceptions alone, unlike a number of other studies, which have compared students’ views with those of their teachers’ (Bell, 2005, p. 46). Bell’s (2005) study shows that a professional consensus is emerging regarding what constitutes an effective language teacher (p. 266). However, the study also reveals that there is a lack of agreement regarding several issues that remain controversial within the theoretical field of SLA such as corrective feedback and the use of grammar (Bell, 2005, p. 266).

Other studies also indicate that error correction causes ambiguity in teachers’ responses. In Davis’s (2003) study, a slight minority (forty-four percent) of the teachers thought students’ errors should not be corrected immediately after having been made. However, more than fifty percent of the teachers in his study either agreed, or did neither agree nor disagree (Davis, 2003, p. 212). Moreover, Schulz’s study (2001) presents almost the exact same figures as Davis’s regarding oral error correction. As a contrast, concerning corrective feedback on written work, teachers show great consensus, with more than ninety percent agreeing with the importance of it (Schulz, 2001, p. 250). The fact that yet more studies indicate an even greater consensus concerning corrective feedback is in itself a hint that ideas and perceptions about the role of error correction remains a controversial issue (Brown, 2009 p. 54; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005, p. 115).

Another issue that shows great discrepancies in teachers’ belief system is that of grammar and its place in the language classroom (Bell, 2005, p. 266; Brown, 2009, p. 51; Schulz, 2001, p. 254-255). Some teachers seem to prefer an explicit focus on grammar in context whereas others do not. However, Borg & Burns (2008) found, when examining beliefs and practices about how grammar and skills teaching are integrated in the classroom,

“that grammar teaching should not be separated from the teaching of language skills” (p. 477). In addition, according to the two researchers, the most surprising data were that the teachers made no reference to SLA literature when discussing their beliefs about grammar instruction (Borg & Burns, 2008, p. 478). To clarify, Borg and Burns (2008) concluded that the evidence teachers cited for why grammar teaching should be integrated in the second language classroom “was largely practical and experimental rather than theoretical and formal; it was grounded predominantly in teachers’ past or more immediate classroom experiences” (p. 476). Furthermore, in the informal follow-up study that Schulz (2001) did with some of her participating teachers, similar results were found: “none of them cited second language acquisition literature (SLA) to support their beliefs” (p. 255). Due to often conflicting findings regarding grammar instruction and error correction by researchers, it is perhaps no wonder that practicing teachers form their own ideas based on practice and experience rather than refer to SLA literature, which makes it even more important to study teachers’ beliefs (Schulz, 2001, p. 256).

### **3. Method and Materials**

The literature reveals that more studies into teachers’ perceptions of second language learning and teaching are needed, especially in Europe, as the majority of previously conducted research has taken place elsewhere. Furthermore, previous studies have tended to focus on one group of teachers, which makes comparative studies salient as they offer the opportunity to establish possible differences between different groups of teachers’ awareness about current knowledge second language acquisition research. This has informed the aims of the present study, which are presented in the first subsection. The following subsection concerns the choice of method used in the present study and explains the reasoning behind the choice as well as the advantages and disadvantages regarding the chosen method. This section concludes with a presentation of the respondents and apart from giving a rationale for the choice of populations of teachers, it also presents facts such as their gender, qualifications, and years of experience.

### 3.1 Research Questions

1. What do Swedish teachers of English believe about second language learning and teaching and what do native English-speaking teachers of English working abroad believe about L2 learning and L2 pedagogy?
2. How do these beliefs relate to current knowledge about language teaching and learning based on second language acquisition research?
3. What are the differences in beliefs between the two groups of English teachers, if any?

### 3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Informed by methodological literature, I decided that a questionnaire would be the best alternative to use, mainly because large amounts of data can be collected in an efficient and standardized way (Dörnyei, 2003). The reasons for using an Internet-based questionnaire are the following: it is fast, secure and cost-efficient; it is impossible to misplace the filled in questionnaires and it is not necessary to rely on the postal services; on top of this, Internet-based questionnaires are environmentally sound and can include respondents from different geographical locations.

However, there are several drawbacks with questionnaires as well. Some of the disadvantages are that surveys often answer simple or superficial questions; the respondents may be unreliable or unmotivated; it is often impossible to correct possible mistakes made by the respondents; respondents may suffer from survey fatigue if the questionnaire is perceived as too long, and respondents have a tendency to agree with items they are unsure or ambivalent about, the so-called acquiescence bias (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 10-14). Additionally, what is perceived as the biggest problem regarding questionnaires is the social desirability bias, that is when respondents answer what they *think* they should feel or perceive and not what they *actually* feel or perceive (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 12).

Apart from deciding to use a questionnaire to investigate English teachers' perceptions about second language learning and teaching for the reasons stated above, and despite the disadvantages, an additionally important reason was that questionnaires have been used in most other such studies as well (Bell, 2005; Brown, 2009; Davis, 2003; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Matsuura et al, 2000; Peacock, 1999; Schulz, 1996, 2001). The idea of using an already existing survey, such as Bell's, Horwitz's or Lightbown & Spada's, was considered, especially since it would offer considerable amounts of results to compare with. However, in



the end I decided to design my own questionnaire, as it would specifically fulfill the aims of the present study. While designing the survey, Survey Monkey was chosen to be the platform to use for both creating and distributing the survey. The rationale behind the choice of Survey Monkey included the fact that the platform allowed for unlimited responses; it was online as well as secure; and it offered the features such as multiple filters deemed necessary.

The questionnaire used in the survey contained two different sections. Section one contained thirteen background questions that dealt with aspects such as years of teaching experience; current age groups and levels; and education (Bell, 2005, p. 267). Section two contained sixteen items concerning second language learning and teaching. The items were categorized into four, fairly broad, topic areas: (a) language learning and age (5 items); (b) corrective feedback (5 items); (c) grammar teaching and learning (4 items) and (d) learners' beliefs (2 items). The sixteen items were randomly ordered, rather than grouped into categories (Bell, 2005, p. 261). Each of the items was followed by a 4-point Likert scale, which the respondents were asked to rate from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The use of a 4-point scale rather than a 5-point one was in the hope of getting the respondents to indicate more clearly whether they agreed or not with a particular item (Matsuura et al, 2001, p. 73; Brown, 2009, p. 50). It was also deemed important for respondents to have the opportunity to clarify and/or comment their rating of each item, which is why a comment field accompanied all the items in section two (Bell, 2005, p. 267; Brown, 2009, p. 57).

The questionnaire was piloted mid-March. The pilot group consisted of teachers who had previously taught in Sweden but were not currently doing so, and of teachers who had taught in Poland, but again were currently not doing so, thereby excluding them from participating in the survey whilst still being part of the two target groups. The pilot confirmed the clarity and content focus of the questions and no changes were made.

### 3.3 Respondents

The respondents consisted of two groups of teachers. One group consisted of Swedish teachers of English who taught the subject at either junior high or high school level in Sweden. The other group of teachers consisted of native English-speaking teachers of English who taught at different language schools in Poland. The language schools in question all offer classes for younger learners (YL), teens and adults spanning from beginner courses to CPE; two teachers taught teens and adults, the others taught YLs, teens and adults. The inclusion criteria were as follows: for the Swedish group the participants had to have a teaching degree

from Sweden, work in Sweden at the time of the survey, and the participants could not be a native speaker of English; for the other group, the participants had to be a native speaker of English, work in Poland at the time of the survey, and work at one of the participating language schools. All those surveyed work for schools that state that they use the communicative method.

The groups surveyed were chosen because nobody, to my knowledge, has studied neither Swedish teachers of English, nor native English speaking teachers of English working abroad (Poland was chosen since I have personal contacts there). Additionally, very few studies have been conducted in Europe; therefore this study fills a gap. Furthermore, all of the teachers in the Swedish group have national teaching certificates whereas most respondents in the other group have degrees but not teaching degrees. However, the participating language schools are all considered to be training schools and offer much teacher training. I approached personal contacts and asked them to help me facilitate the questionnaire by forwarding emails about the survey to fellow English teachers at their schools (Borg & Burns, 2008, p. 460).

Excluding the pilot data, 33 English teachers completed the survey. Nine respondents were excluded. Five were excluded because the data was incomplete in too many parts, that is, they failed to respond to some background questions as well as most questionnaire items; one teacher in the Swedish group was excluded for being a native English speaker and another one for not having a Swedish teaching certificate. Furthermore, two teachers in the native English-speaking group were also excluded since they were native Poles. Thus, the results then cover the data collected from 24 respondents; 12 of them were Swedish teachers of English working in Sweden and the other 12 respondents were native English-speaking teachers of English working in Poland.

Based on the background data several facts such as variety of English spoken, gender, qualifications, and years of teaching experience, were collected. A majority of the native English-speakers were from the United Kingdom, only one out of the twelve was from elsewhere: New Zealand. All twelve in the other group were native Swedes. Moreover, the native English-speaking population consisted of five women and seven men whereas the Swedish group consisted of ten women and two men.<sup>2</sup> Due to the differences in responses regarding gender, this study does not examine the data from a gender-difference perspective.

Concerning qualifications, the data revealed that all of the Swedish respondents had a Swedish teaching certificate. Several of these respondents also held a double major in two subjects, as this was a requirement for a while in Sweden. Furthermore, most of the Swedish teachers of English in the present study teach another language, like Swedish or French.

Additionally, out of the twelve native English-speaking respondents, three did not answer the question about qualifications; whether this means they have no post-secondary school degree or not is impossible to gather from the data. Moreover, of the nine answers collected from this group, seven listed a Bachelor degree as their highest degree and one of these respondents also had a post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE), and two listed a post graduate diploma as their highest degree, and one of these two also had a PGCE.

The data regarding years of teaching experience is presented in Table 1. The data is broken down into, on the one hand, years of experience overall for the participating teachers, and, on the other hand, a comparison between the two groups.

Table 1: Years of teaching experience\*

Years	N – overall	% – overall	N – native English-speaking group	% – native English-speaking group	N – Swedish teachers of English	% – Swedish teachers of English
0-4	8	33.3	6	50.0	2	16.7
5-9	2	8.3	-	-	2	16.7
10-14	5	20.8	1	8.3	4	33.3
15-19	6	25.0	4	33.3	2	16.7
20+	3	12.5	1	8.3	2	16.7
<i>Total</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>99.9</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>99.9</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>100.1</i>

\*Figures rounded to the nearest 10<sup>th</sup>.

Table 1 shows that a small majority of the teachers in the study have ten years of experience or more. However, when dividing the responses along the two groups a slightly different picture emerges. Of the native English-speaking teachers of English, fifty percent have ten years of experience or more, while the other fifty percent of this group have only four years of experience or less whereas the Swedish-speaking teachers of English show a more even distribution in terms of their years spent teaching. In the latter group a majority have ten years of experience or more but only two people have four years of experience or less and the same number fall into the next bracket, that of teachers with five to nine years of experience. The difference within the native English speaking group is less surprising than it seems as the language schools in Poland participating in the survey are considered training schools; they often attract new teachers but at the same time also very experienced teachers who want to go into teacher training.

## 4. Results

The results of what the twenty-four respondents believe about second language learning and teaching are presented in this section. The first subsection concerns the results of the questionnaire items for all respondents whereas the second subsection deals with how the results differ between the two groups surveyed. The results are presented in tables and the responses in percentages as well as in absolute numbers; the response rate each item obtained is also listed in the overall response table. Furthermore, both subsections include tables about the number of comments each questionnaire item received, not only overall but also divided between the two groups.

### 4.1 Data from the Questionnaire Items – Overall

This subsection presents data from all twenty-four respondents about the questionnaire items; they can be found in Table 2 and the items are listed as they appeared in the survey. After the table, an in-depth presentation of the responses follows. The subsection concludes with Table 3, which lists the number of comments each questionnaire item received.

Table 2: Beliefs about second language learning and teaching – all teachers \*

Statement	Strongly agree % and (N)	Agree % and (N)	Disagree % and (N)	Strongly disagree % and (N)	Response rate N/Total
1 Adults learn a second language differently than children do.	47.83 (11)	43.48 (10)	8.70 (2)		23/24
2 Making errors and discussion them can facilitate the process of language learning.	66.67 (16)	33.33 (8)			24/24
3 Learners' beliefs about second language acquisition can either hinder or help them in their learning.	33.33 (8)	66.67 (16)			24/24
4 When students do not learn what they are taught it is mainly due to them not being ready to learn a specific language feature.	8.33 (2)	25 (6)	66.67 (16)		24/24
5 L2 students' errors should always be corrected immediately.			79.17 (19)	20.83 (5)	24/24
6 Immersion programs are better than other forms of second language education.	13.64 (3)	63.64 (14)	22.73 (5)		22/24
7 A focus on grammar in the second language classroom is important in helping students achieve accuracy.	16.67 (4)	50.00 (12)	33.33 (8)		24/24

8	Learning a first language differs from learning a second language.	62.50 (15)	33.33 (8)	4.17 (1)		24/24
9	Most students want teachers to correct their mistakes as soon as possible	26.09 (6)	56.52 (13)	17.39 (4)		23/24
10	Finding out what learners believe about second language acquisition can help teachers in their teaching.	8.70 (2)	86.96 (20)	4.35 (1)		23/24
11	Students tend to copy each other's L2-errors when engaging in pair-work.	4.17 (1)	29.17 (7)	66.67 (16)		24/24
12	Grammar should be taught in isolation in the second language classroom.		4.17 (1)	37.50 (9)	58.33 (14)	24/24
13	3-year-olds have metalinguistic knowledge.	8.70 (2)	34.78 (8)	43.48 (10)	13.04 (3)	23/24
14	Most learners of a specific L2 go through the same developmental stages.		56.52 (13)	39.13 (9)	4.35 (1)	23/24
15	The younger the student is, the better it is with respect to learning a second language.	12.50 (3)	45.83 (11)	33.33 (8)	8.33 (2)	24/24
16	Most L2 errors are caused by differences between the L1 and the L2.	4.17 (1)	79.17 (19)	16.67 (4)		24/24

\* Figures rounded to the nearest 10<sup>th</sup>.

Questionnaire item (QI) 1 showed a very strong tendency of agreement, twenty-two of the twenty-three teachers who responded to this QI either strongly agreed or agreed with the item in question, that is “adults learn a second language differently than children do”. Only one respondent disagreed with the item and no comment was provided.

All twenty-four respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with QI 2 and 3 whereas they either disagreed or strongly disagreed with QI 5. The fact that these three items showed such striking consensus is promising since it indicates an awareness of what current research shows.

A majority of the responding teachers disagreed with QI 4 (When students do not learn what they are taught it is mainly due to them not being ready to learn a specific language feature). However, the remaining thirty-three percent of the respondents showed a completely opposite view as they either strongly agreed or agreed.

QI 6 which concerned whether immersion programs are better than other forms of second language education is the item that received the least responses, twenty-two. Despite this, almost eighty percent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this item. This is perhaps a curious result since none of the teachers in the survey teach in such a program. A

slight majority agreed with QI 7 (A focus on grammar in the second language classroom is important in helping students achieve accuracy).

All but one respondent either agreed or strongly agreed with QIs 8 and 10 (Finding out what learners believe about second language acquisition can help teachers in their teaching). Item 8 concerned the differences in learning an L1 versus an L2, but the comment made by the one respondent who disagreed with this item might indicate an answer that was due to a misunderstanding, that is, L1 was understood as the first language learned after one's mother tongue: "1<sup>st</sup> language is much slower to be acquired, but lays the groundwork for faster acquisition of further languages". Furthermore, a majority of the responding teachers believed that their students want the teacher to correct their mistakes as soon as possible, as seen in item 9.

QI 11 (Students tend to copy each other's L2-errors when engaging in pair-work) had more than thirty percent of the respondents agreeing with this statement. This is a somewhat surprising result when considering the amount of pair and/or small group work taking place in the communicative classroom.

A not so surprising result considering most respondents adhere to the communicative approach is the majority result showed in QI 12 (Grammar should be taught in isolation in the second language classroom). All teachers but one disagreed with the statement.

QIs 13, 14, and 15 showed neither a clear agreement nor a clear disagreement among the respondents. Item 13 (3-year-olds have metalinguistic knowledge) resulted in closer to forty-five percent of the responding teachers either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the item. Slightly more than fifty-five of the respondents agreed with QI 14 (Most learners of a specific L2 go through similar developmental stages), and practically the same amount of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with QI 15 (The younger the student is, the better it is with respect to learning a second language).

QI 16 showed that the teachers had a strong preference for the perception that it is transfer between L1 and L2 that causes most of the errors in student output. This is an interesting result considering that most of the native English-speaking teachers do not speak the L1 in question, which is Polish.

Table 3: Number of comments each questionnaire item received.

Questionnaire item	N
12	8
1	7
6	6
3, 4, 8, and 9	5
2, 5, 7, 10, 11, and 15	4
13, and 16	3
14	2

As can be seen from table 3, not many QIs collected many comments. QI 12 (Grammar should be taught in isolation in the second language classroom) received the highest amount of comments, eight. QI 1 (Adults learn a second language differently than children do) and QI 6 (Immersion programs are better than other forms of second language education) received seven and six comments respectively. Whether the lack of comments is an indication of lack of time on the teachers' part or rather clear opinions about second language learning and teaching is not something the results reveal.

#### 4.2 Differences in Perceptions between the Two Groups of Teachers

This subsection presents the differences between the two groups of teachers partaking in the study. Table 4 collapses the results into two categories for each statement, that is, 'agree' is comprised of strongly agree and agree, and 'disagree' is comprised of disagree and strongly disagree. The subsection finishes with Table 5, which shows the spread of the comments among the two groups of teachers. Both tables are categorized into native English-speaking teachers of English and Swedish-speaking teachers of English.

Table 4: Beliefs about second language learning and teaching – both groups of teachers \*

Statement		Native English-speaking teachers of English		Swedish-speaking teachers of English	
		Agree % and (N)	Disagree % and (N)	Agree % and (N)	Disagree % and (N)
1	Adults learn a second language differently than children do.	91.67 (11)	8.33 (1)	90.91 (10)	9.09 (1)
2	Making errors and discussion them can facilitate the process of language learning.	100.00 (12)		100.00 (12)	
3	Learners' beliefs about second language acquisition can either hinder or help them in their learning.	100.00 (12)		100.00 (12)	
4	When students do not learn what they are taught it is mainly due to them not being ready to learn a specific language feature.	16.67 (2)	83.33 (10)	50.00 (6)	50.00 (6)

5	L2 students' errors should always be corrected immediately.		100.00 (12)		100.00 (12)
6	Immersion programs are better than other forms of second language education.	90.91 (10)	9.09 (1)	63.64 (7)	36.36 (4)
7	A focus on grammar in the second language classroom is important in helping students achieve accuracy.	75.00 (9)	25.00 (3)	58.33 (7)	41.67 (5)
8	Learning a first language differs from learning a second language.	91.67 (11)	8.33 (1)	100.00 (12)	
9	Most students want teachers to correct their mistakes as soon as possible.	90.91 (10)	9.09 (1)	75.00 (9)	25.00 (3)
10	Finding out what learners believe about second language acquisition can help teachers in their teaching.	100.00 (11)		91.67 (11)	8.33 (1)
11	Students tend to copy each other's L2-errors when engaging in pair-work.	41.67 (5)	58.33 (7)	25.00 (3)	75.00 (9)
12	Grammar should be taught in isolation in the second language classroom.		100.00 (12)	8.33 (1)	91.67 (11)
13	3-year-olds have metalinguistic knowledge.	16.67 (2)	83.33 (10)	72.73 (8)	27.27 (3)
14	Most learners of a specific L2 go through the same developmental stages.	54.55 (6)	45.45 (5)	58.33 (7)	41.67 (5)
15	The younger the student is, the better it is with respect to learning a second language.	41.67 (5)	58.33 (7)	75.00 (9)	25.00 (3)
16	Most L2 errors are caused by differences between the L1 and the L2.	75.00 (9)	25.00 (3)	91.67 (11)	8.33 (1)

\* Figures rounded to the nearest 10<sup>th</sup>.

When comparing the two groups' results it became apparent that several of the items reached either a complete consensus or a very high degree of consensus. QIs that showed this high frequency of consensus consisted of the following items: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, and 12.

On the one hand, QIs 4, 6, 7, and 9 showed that there was a much greater consensus amongst the native English speaking teachers of English whereas the other group had a larger amount of fluctuation in their responses. On the other hand, QIs 11, 15, and 16 showed the opposite.

When it comes to item 13 (3-year-olds have metalinguistic knowledge), there is an inverse correlation between the responses of the two groups, that is seventeen percent of the English group agreed but eighty-three percent did not whereas seventy-three percent of the Swedish group agreed but twenty-seven did not.



QI 14 (Most learners of a specific L2 go through similar developmental stages) collected very similar results from the two groups. Around fifty-five percent of both groups of teachers agreed with the item, but forty-five percent did not. This item then indicates the highest ambivalence among the respondents.

Table 5: Number of comments listed for each questionnaire item – both groups of teachers

Questionnaire item	Native English-speaking teachers of English		Questionnaire item	Swedish-speaking teachers of English
1, 12	6		1, 4, 5, 6, 13, 15	1
2, 4, 7, 10, 11	4		2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16	-
3, 6, 8, 9	5		12	2
5, 15, 16	3			
13, 14	2			
Total	81			8

The native English speaking teachers of English had a ten times higher contribution of comments than the Swedish group did. In addition, two out of the eight comments in the latter group consisted of “I have no idea” whereas only four of the eighty-one in the former group consisted of similarly phrased comments.

## 5. Discussion

The present study has identified both consistencies and discrepancies between teachers’ beliefs about second language learning and teaching and that of the current knowledge about language teaching and learning based on SLA research. Furthermore, this study also shows that there are differences between the two groups of teachers investigated. Of those surveyed, there was general agreement about several of the items related to language learning and age; corrective feedback; and learners’ beliefs but divergence mainly on items relating to grammar teaching and learning.

The survey contained sixteen questionnaire items (QI) and out of these, five items (items 1, 6, 8, 13, and 15) concern language learning and age. A majority of teachers were in agreement regarding three of the items (1, 6, 8). Item 13 and 15, on the other hand, show a near fifty-fifty split along the line of agreeing and disagreeing.

That more than ninety percent of the teachers in the study agree with item 1 (Adults learn a second language differently than children do) and 8 (Learning a first language differs

from learning a second language) goes against current understanding. Fairly recent research comparing L1 and L2 acquisition have found interesting similarities (Herschensohn, 2009; Schwartz, 2003; Unsworth, 2004). Schwartz (2003) argued convincingly that child L2 learners are especially important to second language acquisition research since young L2 learners exhibit similarities to both L1 learners and adult L2 learners. Moreover, Unsworth (2004) showed that both child and adult L2 learners go through the same three acquisition stages when learning how to use direct object scrambling in Dutch (p. 8). In addition, this study also showed similarities with L1 learners of Dutch who employ the two later stages but not the first (Unsworth, 2004, p. 8). The results of these two items in the present study suggest that a majority of the teachers are unaware of fairly recent findings on the similarities between child L1, child L2, and adult L2 learners (Herschenson, 2009; Schwartz, 2003; Unsworth, 2004).

The overall responses, almost eighty percent, to item 6, concerning immersion programs, reflect a strong preference for the superiority of this type of educational system. It is difficult to know *why* a majority of the respondents believe that immersion programs are better than other second language education since the QI only received six comments. The background data reveals that none of the respondents work, presently, at schools that offer this type of educational program. Furthermore, none of the comments and nothing in the background data suggest that any of the respondents have worked in immersion programs. Additionally, several of the comments indicate that the respondents were perhaps unsure of the meaning of immersion program: “Certainly at our school we do not allow L1 in the classroom and that does help” (language school respondent). “Neither agree nor disagree - depends on the learning/teaching styles” (language school respondent).

Item 13 (3-year-olds have metalinguistic knowledge) caused a near split along the agree- and disagree-line when looking at the group as a whole. This is perhaps not unexpected since the teachers in the present study are all teachers of a second language and this statement is possibly more pertinent to L1 teachers and researchers. Furthermore, fifty percent of the respondents only teach teens, which could have been another factor in trying to understand the results if it were not for the fact that almost seventy-five percent of the teachers from Sweden agree with the statement. However, anyone who teaches a language, and especially those who teach children would probably benefit from knowing that very young children can judge sentences like “Ball me the bring” and “Bring me the ball” as being silly or not silly (Sinclair, 1986, p. 612) as it may alter what teachers think is possible to do or not to do in the language classroom. That more than eighty percent of those who do teach children in this

study believe that the statement is inaccurate points towards a lack of knowledge that might affect their teaching.

The fact that item 15 (The younger the student is, the better it is with respect to learning a second language) received such diverse responses might be explained by that fact there is still an ongoing debate amongst second language learning researchers about whether age is or is not the most decisive factor regarding L2 learners possibility to reach native-like attainment (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2009; Birdsong, 2005; Long, 2005; Van Boxtel et al, 2005). The responses in the present study simply reflect the conflicting findings presented by researchers of SLA. Long (2005), in his review of previous studies which showed that many teens and adults do reach native-like attainment, argues that the studies were flawed in some way. Moreover, Abrahamson & Hyltenstam (2009) argue that their research shows that very few L2-learners ever reach native-like attainment, regardless of when they started learning their L2, whereas Van Boxtel et al. (2005), among others, show that late L2 starters can reach native-like proficiency and therefore age alone does not affect L2 learners' ability to speak their second language to a native-like standard.

However, there is a distinct difference between the two groups: almost sixty percent of the teachers working in Poland disagree with the statement whereas seventy-five of the ones working in Sweden believe in it. The four respondents who commented on item 15 all disagreed with the QI. Their need and willingness to comment may spring from their perception that generally, people believe that the younger an L2-learner is, the better, even though second language acquisition research shows conflicting findings. The comments are as follow:

- (1)
  - (a) Older students can [h]ave the advantage of previous experience of language learning, strong internal motivation and a reasonable attention span!
  - (b) While practically this might be true in many situations, age itself is not the issue, rather that age implies a difference in time commitment, enthusiasm, social risk-taking, etc.
  - (c) Only pronunciation.
  - (d) It may be easier for most, but some people do not find learning a second language easy, even when young.

Additionally, it is only the language school respondents, that is, native English-speaking teachers of English working in Poland, who have commented on item 15. This is possibly due

to the fact that a majority of these teachers teach children, adolescents and adults. Contrastingly, most of the teachers working in Sweden only teach teens between the ages of 16-19. Thus, only teaching one age group might possibly be an explanation to why they are not up-to-date on the latest research about age and second language learning.

The five items (2, 5, 9, 11, 16) regarding teachers' beliefs about corrective feedback provide both promising and surprising data. A number of studies concerning students and teachers' beliefs have shown that a majority of students want immediate feedback on errors whereas a majority of teachers disagree with this notion (Davis, 2003, p. 216; Horwitz, 1988, p. 290; Brown, 2009, p. 51-51). That such a large percentage of the teachers in this study believe that their students want immediate error correction (item 9) even though one hundred percent of the teachers state that students' errors should *not* be addressed immediately (item 5) shows a deep understanding of the fact that perceptions held by students may very well differ from those held by teachers. It may be this understanding that leads teachers to comment that it is very important to explain "why, as their teacher, you do not do things in a way that may not entirely meet their initial expectations" (language school respondent). This notion corresponds to what Peacock (1999) states: "teachers [should] explain course objectives to learners in order to reduce misunderstanding, dissatisfaction, and opposition to teachers and teaching" (p. 261). Numerous researchers that study students and/or teachers' belief systems concur; these researchers are adamant that it is of paramount interest to teachers to become aware that students enter language studies with preconceived ideas that may be detrimental to their language learning despite the teacher's knowledge and expertise when it comes to second language teaching (Brown, 2009, p. 55; Horwitz, 1988, p. 293; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009, p. 113; Peacock, 1999, p. 261; Schulz 2001, p. 256).

Another encouraging sign is that all of the responding teachers in this study believe that making errors and discussing them can facilitate language learning (item 2). White showed in her thorough study that focusing on negative evidence and discussing typical errors made by L2-learners help them learn (White, 1991, p. 158); and Long & Porter (1985) stated that errors are "an inevitable, even 'healthy' part of language learning" (p. 223). Lightbown & Spada (2013) also pointed out that a focus on errors is especially important in L2-classrooms where the learners share the same L1, as mistakes will not lead to a communication breakdown, which makes it almost impossible for them to discover the errors by themselves (p. 183). The comments made also support the teachers' awareness:

(2)

- (a) It can help to highlight the differences between L1 and the target language, to clarify why and when the uses change.
- (b) I focus on pointing out errors both on the spot and on a delayed basis. In many ways they are the most effective way to aid the learning process.

That more than thirty percent of the respondents believe that students copy each other's mistakes during pair work (item 11) is very surprising, especially considering that all teachers in the study work in school systems that adhere to the communicative approach, which encourages student-student interaction. Furthermore, it is not consistent with what many studies have shown (see Long & Porter's, 1985, review; McDonough, 2004). Only one of the respondents who agreed with the QI added: "Possibly. I have no real idea though" (language school respondent).

The role of L1 in second language acquisition has seen many changes over the past century. From believing that all L2 errors were transferred and thus caused by the L1, to that of hardly any of L2 learners' errors being caused by L1, the pendulum has swung back somewhat as research shows that some errors are caused by students' L1 but many L2 errors are similar, regardless of the learners' L1s and of the L2s being learned (Spada & Lightbown, 1999, p. 2; Swan & Smith, 2001). The results for item 16 (Most L2 errors are caused by differences between the L1 and the L2), which have a majority of the teachers agreeing with the statement show that the belief in transfer is a strong one, at least amongst this group of teachers, even though this is not borne out by current research.

(3)

- (a) Many are, especially if the learner is already fluent in L1. However, many other errors may simply be due to that particular L2 aspect not having been acquired yet, or it could be a fossilized error, due to confusion at an earlier stage of learning. (agree; language school respondent)
- (b) Most L2 errors are caused by a lack of understanding of what the is language actually means. Approaching language on a form level leads to manipulating language in a way that it can't be used. (disagree; language school respondent)

Moving on to the two items (item 3 and 10) concerning the importance of examining learners' beliefs, it is very encouraging that the QIs gain such high agreement amongst the responding teachers. It is especially important that teachers investigate the belief systems held by their students considering that a majority of studies continue to indicate that many students have perceptions of language learning and teaching that affect their learning in a negative way, and

are diametrically opposed to what many teachers believe (Brown, 2009; Davis, 2003; Horwitz, 1987, 1988, Peacock, 1999). However, students' perceptions are not set in stone; Brown's (2009) study indicated that there is a change in the beliefs held by second year language students compared to those of first year students (p. 55). Consequently, it is paramount for teachers to continually identify the perceptions held by their own students, that is, investigating it once is not enough. Brown (2009) even suggested that teachers design their own questionnaires (p. 57), and have brief discussions and/or explanations about second language learning and teaching, thus minimizing learner demotivation and dissatisfaction (Brown, 2009, p.55; Peacock, 1999, p. 261). That the teachers in this study seem aware of the importance of this is indicated in their comments:

- (4)
  - (a) Affective barriers are often raised by older learners, who may already have it in their head that they can't learn/it's going to be very difficult etc. (item 3; language school respondent)
  - (b) All learners are different. But certainly some have some misconception that they have to learn every word in a text or translate everything back into L1. (item 3; language school respondent)
  - (c) Yes, particularly for older learners, as the teacher may need to work around some of these beliefs. (item 10; language school respondent)
  - (d) You must build an understanding of where your learner is coming from in order to support their learning. (item 10; language school respondent)
  - (e) It's a fundamental part of getting to know your students, managing their expectations and getting the best from them. (item 10; language school respondent)

The consensus amongst teachers concerning students' perceptions is not found in their beliefs about grammar teaching and learning. The four items in question (items 4, 7, 12, and 14) exhibit the most fluctuating responses not only when looking at the whole group but also when comparing the two groups. This fluctuation is evinced in numerous studies which show that teachers' responses show considerable differences concerning certain controversial aspects such as grammar teaching and learning, and error correction (Bell, 2005; Brown, 2009; Davis, 2003; Peacock, 1999; Schulz, 1996, 2001).

Of the four items categorized as regarding grammar teaching and learning, item 12 (Grammar should be taught in isolation in the second language classroom) caused the least furor among the QIs. Out of the twenty-four responses only one teacher agrees with this

statement. Worth mentioning is that the teacher who agreed with the statement added a comment that says: “Not only in isolation” (high school respondent), which suggests that the teacher in question does not fully agree with item 12. That grammar should *not* be taught in isolation, but rather in relation to skills work, is a belief held by many teachers. In Borg and Burn’s (2008) much larger study, which had 173 respondents and only dealt with grammar issues, almost ninety percent of the respondents stated that grammar should be integrated into the teaching of language skills (p. 465). This aspect, then, is not a controversial one when it comes to beliefs about grammar teaching and learning held by teachers. Comments from the teachers in the present study are of a similar vein to those in Borg and Burn’s (2008) study:

(5)

- (a) Must be integrated with use in order to be fully understood/used correctly. (language school respondent)
- (b) I believe learners who can correctly apply uncontextualised 'raw' grammar to their language output are rare. (language school respondent)
- (c) If we want students to understand the communicative implications of grammar, it has to be dealt with in a range of contexts and contrasted. (language school respondent)

Another of the QIs concerning grammar that receives a majority agreement is item 7 (A focus on grammar in the second language classroom is important in helping students achieve accuracy); two thirds of all the teachers agree with this item. However, when comparing the two groups of respondents a slightly different picture emerges: the native English-speaking teachers are much more cohesive in their agreement than the other group. Only four teachers (language school respondents) chose to comment and three of them agreed with the statement.

(6)

- (a) Tricky. I both agree & disagree, as the grammar component does not have to be a focus, but still remain an integral part of learning. YL classes rarely focus on the grammar overtly, yet accuracy is still attained through context. (disagreed)
- (b) A focus but not death by grammar! (agreed)
- (c) With a focus on meaning before form. (agreed)

Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis (2004) state that in its strong version, communicative language teaching is primarily meaning-oriented (p. 244). The fact that all respondents teach in this environment might have something to do with the responses; some teachers may still not be

aware that meaning-oriented teaching does not necessarily exclude a focus on grammar (Basturkmen et al, 2004, p. 244). Moreover, the respondents might not know that numerous studies, often carried out in Canadian immersion programs, which generally focus on meaning over form, have shown that when learners receive explicit focus on form, especially grammatical input, their accuracy improves, not just for the moment but also over time, and they outperform those who did not receive any instruction. (Lyster, 1994; 2004; White, Spada, Lightbown & Ranta, 1991). Furthermore, the changes in the Swedish school system, with more focus on fluency than accuracy, might have something to do with the responses from this group, but in order to better understand their reasoning, comments would not only have been preferable but a must.

The remaining two QIs dealing with grammar teaching and learning are items 4 and 14. The issues raised by these two items are so closely related that they could be said to be two sides of the same coin. The research into the predictability of developmental stages in L2 acquisition, regardless of L1, can be said to have spawned research that tried to explain *why* students learn some language features successfully whereas other features remain unacquired (Spada & Lightbown, 1999, p. 2). However, the teachers' responses do not mirror the close relationship between the two items.

The responses to item 14 (Most learners of a specific L2 go through the same developmental stages) show a slight emphasis of agreement with the statement, both when viewing the respondents as one group as well as when comparing them as two groups. The QI has, unfortunately, only two comments: "Most, but not all. I would prefer to say 'similar' stages." (agree; language school respondent), "To a point, but this is heavily influenced by their L1. (disagree; language school respondent). Whether it is the choice of the wording in the QI – "the *same* developmental stages" or an unawareness on the teachers' part of the research into developmental sequences, that cause so many of the teachers to disagree with the statement is impossible to know. However, research into developmental sequences has been around in abundance since the early 1970s, therefore, it cannot be claimed to be a recent addition to SLA research (Spada & Lightbown, 1999, p. 2). Moreover, this research has proven beyond a doubt that L2 learners, with different L1s, move along the same developmental paths, at least regarding some linguistic structures, and often these paths are even similar to those who speak the L2 in question as an L1 (Spada & Lightbown, 1999; Herschenson, 2009; Schwartz, 2003; Unsworth, 2004). In addition, the degree of the L1's influence on L2 developmental stages seems to vary: some studies show very little L1 influence (Håkansson, Pienemann, Sayehli, 2002, p. 256) whereas others show more (Spada



& Lightbown, 1999, p. 16-17) despite the distance between the L1 and the L2.

The responses to item 4 (When students do not learn what they are taught it is mainly due to them not being ready to learn a specific language feature) show a startling lack of consensus. Two thirds of the twenty-four teachers disagree with the statement, but when comparing the two groups this changes. The group working in Poland is more cohesive in their opinion on this issue, with over eighty percent of them disagreeing whereas the teachers from Sweden are down to a fifty-fifty split. It is, of course, possible that some of the respondents understood the QI more broadly, thus believing laziness or lack of interest are the main reasons students do not learn what they are taught. Pienemann's teachability hypothesis and the ensuing research testing the hypothesis seems to have given some answers as to why students do not learn what they are taught by pointing towards the stages students need to go through to acquire native-like morphology and syntax (Spada & Lightbown, 1999, p. 3). Some of the comments (language school respondents only) to item 4 hint towards some knowledge, and disagreement, of this research:

(7)

- (a) The hierarchy of grammar acquisition is a little overstated. It doubtlessly exists to some degree, but I doubt it's a main cause of learner's failing to learn (as a main cause I would tentatively point to a lack of motivation to use the target feature if it doesn't help learners say what they want to say). (disagree)
- (b) Not always, but often this is the case. Learners acquire language as they are ready to. (agree)
- (c) It's down to many factors. Could be that [they] are demotivated, lack interest, struggle with a particular language point, etc. (disagree)

## 6. Conclusion

Over the years, various studies have investigated the perceptions teachers hold about second language learning and teaching, and even though the teachers in these studies agreed on many aspects, there were still several areas where they disagreed (Bell, 2005; Borg & Burns, 2008; Brown, 2009; Davis, 2003; Peacock, 1999; Schultz, 1996, 2001; Vasquez & Harvey, 2010). The conflicting results in previous works are what prompted this study as well as the knowledge that very few studies have been conducted in Europe. Furthermore, since some of the earlier studies indicated that teachers seldom incorporate what new research shows into their belief systems, this study sought to link the results of the present study to that of current

knowledge about second language learning and teaching based on SLA research to see if this was indeed the case (Borg & Burns, 2008; Vasquez & Harvey, 2010).

For belief systems held by teachers about the four categories of second language learning and teaching that this study investigated, there were majority agreements amongst the participating teachers, sometimes strong ones, on several of the issues such as: a knowledge about learners' beliefs sometimes being detrimental to their own learning; every single error a student makes should not be corrected, even though they might want it to be; making errors can facilitate learning; students do not copy each other's mistakes; that transfer plays a major role in L2 learners' mistakes; immersion programs being the best form to learn a second language; a focus on grammar helps students achieve accuracy, and grammar should not be taught in isolation. That current knowledge about second language teaching and learning based on SLA research does not support some of the perceptions held by this group of teachers makes it evident that further research into teachers' beliefs is required. Moreover, the fact that several studies indicate that teachers do not seem to change their beliefs or practice just by reading about new research also makes it important that teacher development courses include hands-on elements (Borg & Burns, 2008; Vasquez & Harvey, 2010).

Furthermore, the results also show that this group of teachers is still uncertain and possibly not knowledgeable about areas such as: the impact of developmental stages on L2 learners; similarities between L1 and L2 acquisition, and between child and adult learners; as well as the role of age in second language acquisition. Therefore, research into teachers' belief systems should not only continue, but it should also be connected to what SLA and teaching research actually says. Additionally, there are minor differences between the two groups, that is, both groups often hold the same opinion but the percentage of agreement or disagreement vary. However, some items yielded opposing beliefs: item 4 (When students do not learn what they are taught it is mainly due to them not being ready to learn a specific language feature) where the teachers working in Sweden were split into fifty-fifty whereas the other group strongly disagreed with the item; item 13 (3-year-olds have metalinguistic knowledge) to which the teachers working in Sweden agreed, but the other group disagreed; and item 15 (The younger the student is, the better it is with respect to learning a second language) to which the teachers working in Poland disagreed and the teachers in the other group agreed. These conflicting results also show that comparing different groups of teachers will further our knowledge about the perceptions held by educators. Due to few respondents, the results in this study can merely hint in the same direction as previously conducted studies have.

Apart from having fewer respondents than hoped for, which might be due to the fact that the survey coincided with national exams in Sweden; inspections at the language schools in Poland; and Easter break, there are other limitations of the study. The sampling itself is a limitation as it is a convenience sample; it is neither representative of English teachers in Sweden nor of native English-speaking teachers in Poland. Therefore, the results of the survey are only applicable to the respondents and not to these wider populations. Moreover, despite the provision of comment fields accompanying each QI, they were hardly used, which is unfortunate as time constraints on the study made it impossible to have follow-up interviews which would have helped to gain a better and deeper understanding of the reasoning of the participating teachers. Furthermore, questionnaires are difficult to construct and the wording of some of the items was perhaps unclear which might have led teachers to disregard the QI.

Some of the limitations mentioned above might serve as reminders of what to include in future research. Even though comment fields were provided in the present study they were not fully utilized. Therefore, future research should ensure to include follow-up interviews, or have open-ended questions in questionnaires, to shed light on teachers' responses. Furthermore, this study did not investigate how teachers' perceptions are reflected in their actual teaching practice, which is another line of research that would be beneficial to the field of belief systems. Additionally, the field would benefit further studies that compare different groups of teachers' perceptions since the results in this study indicate that they differ.

Moreover, it would be interesting if more studies were carried out in Europe, since a majority of previous studies have been done in Asia or North America. It might also benefit the field of belief system research to perhaps do more studies in the Scandinavian countries or the Netherlands where English is almost a second language and plays an increasingly big part. It would also be interesting to compare teachers' perceptions of second language teaching and learning to that of their students, especially since many students in these countries are quite proficient by the time they finish high school.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The terms language acquisition and language learning are used synonymously in this essay (Horwitz, 1988, p. 293).

<sup>2</sup> The Swedish group of teachers is not representative regarding gender population. Fifty one percent of the teachers are women and forty-nine percent are men at high school level in Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2012, p. 37).

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## Appendix 1: The Survey

### Teachers' Perspectives on Second Language Education

#### Information about the Study and Participation

This study is part of a research project for advanced studies in English linguistics at Lund University. The aim of the study is to learn about teachers' perspectives on second language education.

The student conducting the study is Camilla Kvist under the supervision of Dr. Francis M. Hult, both at Lund University. If you have questions regarding the study or interest in the finished project, please contact either Camilla Kvist at [Camilla.Kvist.105@student.lu.se](mailto:Camilla.Kvist.105@student.lu.se) or Dr. Francis M. Hult at [Francis.Hult@englund.lu.se](mailto:Francis.Hult@englund.lu.se).

The study contains two sections. Section one consists of background questions; section two contains a 16 item-questionnaire with room for comments. It should only take about 25 minutes to complete. Please feel free to use the comment-field to expand on your answers or to comment on how you have interpreted the statements.

All responses will remain anonymous. By completing this survey you agree that the anonymous responses may be used for published and unpublished research purposes, including a degree project at Lund University.

Thank you for your time!

#### Section 1

##### Background Questions

1. What is your gender?                      F        M
2. Are you a native speaker of English? Y    N
3. If so, of what English variety?
4. What is your country of origin?
5. In what country are you currently teaching?
6. In what other countries have you taught?
7. What age groups and levels are you teaching during the 2013-2014 academic year?
8. How many years of active teaching experience do you have?
9. Please list any academic degrees (with specializations) you have (if any):
10. Have you completed a CELTA (or equivalent)? Y        N
11. Have you completed a CELTYL (or equivalent)?        Y        N
12. Have you completed a DELTA (or equivalent)? Y        N
13. What is your position at your school/institution?

## Section 2

Questionnaire Items		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Adults learn a second language differently than children do. Comment:				
2	Making errors and discussion them can facilitate the process of language learning. Comment:				
3	Learners' beliefs about second language acquisition can either hinder or help them in their learning. Comment:				
4	When students do not learn what they are taught it is mainly due to them not being ready to learn a specific language feature. Comment:				
5	L2 students' errors should always be corrected immediately. Comment:				
6	Immersion programs are better than other forms of second language education. Comment:				
7	A focus on grammar in the second language classroom is important in helping students achieve accuracy. Comment:				
8	Learning a first language differs from learning a second language. Comment:				
9	Most students want teachers to correct their mistakes as soon as possible. Comment:				
10	Finding out what learners believe about second language acquisition can help teachers in their teaching. Comment:				
11	Students tend to copy each other's L2-errors when engaging in pair-work. Comment:				
12	Grammar should be taught in isolation in the second language classroom. Comment:				
13	3-year-olds have metalinguistic knowledge. Comment:				
14	Most learners of a specific L2 go through the same developmental stages. Comment:				
15	The younger the student is, the better it is with respect to learning a second language. Comment:				
16	Most L2 errors are caused by differences between the L1 and the L2. Comment:				



