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It's simple, isn't it?

Investigating Swedish Pupils' Command of
Canonical Question Tags with Reverse Polarity
at Different Stages of Learning

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Title: *It's simple, isn't it?: Investigating Swedish Pupils' Command of Canonical Question Tags with Reverse Polarity at Different Stages of Learning*

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Abstract: This essay investigates Swedish pupils' command of canonical question tags with reverse polarity in written English at different stages of learning. 22 pupils in 6th grade and 23 pupils in 9th grade completed a set of tag questions which required either a form of *to be*, *to have*, *to do* or a modal verb in the question tag. As hypothesized, the pupils in 9th grade showed a higher command of question tags than the pupils in 6th grade. The pupils in the study also completed a test which tested them on their knowledge of subject-verb agreement and question formation. The results showed that command of subject-verb agreement in declarative and interrogative sentences did not lead to command of canonical question tags with reverse polarity. However, those pupils who showed good command of question tags also had a good command of subject-verb agreement. The pupils had least difficulty with the question tags which required the verbs to be and to have. The test results indicated that the majority of the pupils had not yet mastered question tags with reverse polarity, but were still in the process of acquiring this feature of the English language.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

From an early age, Swedish pupils are frequently exposed to the English language through media such as computer games, movies, books and music. Through these media, a considerable amount of input of spoken and written English is given to the pupils, who without thinking or knowing about it are acquiring an extensive English vocabulary, as well as a familiarity with the rules of grammar, speech sounds and spelling of the English language. English is a compulsory subject in Swedish schools, and pupils are assumed to be quite proficient in the language already by the age of twelve, as can be attested by the requirements of the annual national tests in English in the 6th grade.

English and Swedish both belong to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European languages and share language features such as similar speech sounds and a similar vocabulary. Because of the similarities between these two languages, Swedish learners of English are generally not presented with too many hurdles when trying to learn English. However, many differences still exist between the two languages which present some difficulties for many Swedes in the process of learning English. As opposed to English and many other Indo-European languages such as German and French, there is no inflection for person and number in Swedish in the matter of subject-verb agreement. Swedish learners of English are therefore prone to exclude features such as the third person present tense *-s* and mix up *am*, *are, is, was* and *were* when using the verb *to be*. Errors and mistakes such as these are frequent in the *interlanguage* of learners where the structure and rules from the mother tongue of the learner influence the knowledge and use of the language being learned (Lightbown & Spada, 2008).

In the present study, Swedish pupils' command of canonical question tags with reverse polarity in English will be investigated in order to observe what kind of proficiency in the English language is required to form them correctly. Swan (2005, p. 469) defines question tags as "small questions that often come at the ends of sentences in speech, and sometimes in informal writing".

He is not here, *is he?*

She is late, *isn't she?*

The formation of canonical question tags in English such as those above is rather complex (Tottie & Hoffmann, 2006). In order to form correct canonical question tags which correspond with the preceding sentence, a learner of English has to take into account many features of that preceding sentence, such as verb choice, subject-verb agreement, tense and polarity. This study looks into Swedish pupils' command of canonical question tags at different stages of learning the English language in order to investigate the connection between time spent learning English and the ability to form correct canonical question tags with reverse polarity.

1.2 Aim and scope

The aim of this study is to investigate Swedish pupils' command of canonical question tags with reverse polarity in written English at different stages of learning. Algeo (2006, p. 293) describes a canonical question tag in English as a subordinate interrogative clause made up of the verb of the preceding clause, canonically with reverse polarity, followed by a pronoun whose antecedent is the subject of the preceding clause: *Lisa can help, can't she? Bart isn't here, is he?* A canonical question tag does not need to have reverse polarity, and frequently does not. However, for the purposes of this study *polarity is added* as a constraint in the formation of a correct canonical question tag.

The hypothesis is that pupils at a later stage of learning will display a greater command of canonical question tags since they are more likely to have a firmer grasp on the English grammar required to form a correct question tag, and they have been exposed to more instances of spoken English in which they might have heard canonical question tags being used by speakers of English.

1.3 Material and Method

In order to obtain the empirical data required to investigate the pupils' command of canonical question tags, the participants of the present study have completed two tests. The first of these two tests, *Test 1* (see the Appendix), explores their knowledge and command of subject-verb agreement and how to form questions with the help of auxiliary verbs or the verb *to be*. The second test, *Test 2* (see the Appendix), examines their command of canonical question tags by having them complete unfinished sentences with the correct tag. The study was set up with two different tests in order to obfuscate from the pupils the actual purpose of the investigation. The results from the first test, however, are interesting in the context of this study since they give an indication of the correlation between the pupils' command of subject-verb agreement and their ability to form canonical question tags.

The participants of the present study are 22 pupils in the 6th grade and 23 pupils in the 9th grade. The pupils were told about the purpose of the two tests. Since they are minors, also their parents were informed through a letter which explained the nature and purpose of the investigation and the tests (see the Appendix). By informing the head master of the school, the pupils and their parents, and getting their approval before the tests were conducted, the ethical principles for research proposed by the Swedish Research Council have been adhered to (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002).

Since the same two tests would be used for pupils in the 6th and 9th grade, two very important considerations while preparing the tests were to only use common words which all pupils would be able to understand and to write questions with uncomplicated sentence structures so as not

to confuse the pupils and create a sense of uncertainty. The self-study reference and practice book *English Grammar in Use* by Raymond Murphy was used in the preparation of the two tests (2004).

Two important concerns while preparing and carrying out the present study were to strive for high levels of *validity* and *reliability*. The validity of a study has to do with if the study really investigates what it sets out to do and does not end up investigating something else, albeit closely related (Lagerholm, 2005). The reliability of a study concerns how reliable the study is based how well it was prepared and carried out by the investigator. The aim of the present study was to investigate Swedish pupil's command of canonical question tags at different stages of learning and the method chosen was through a set of tests which tested them on their ability to complete unfinished sentences with the correct tag. It is the conviction of the author of this study that the results of this investigation are valid and reliable.

1.4 Plan of study

The background of the study, its aim and scope, as well as the material and the method to used, have been presented in chapter one. Chapter two will discuss previous research relevant to the present study such as first language influence and developmental sequences in second language learning. In chapter three the results of the study will be presented, discussed and analyzed. Chapter four will discuss the pedagogical implications of the study. The summary, conclusion and ideas for further research are found in chapter five. At the end of the essay are the appendix and the list of references.

2. Previous research

2.1 Question tags and tag questions

The *tag question* is an important and frequently used English sentence pattern (Algeo, 2006). A tag question is a sentence which consists of a declarative statement followed by a mini-question. The complete sentence is the tag question, and the mini-question at the end is the *question tag*. Tottie and Hoffmann call the declarative statement *the anchor* and mention that the subject in the anchor must be "a full noun phrase, a pronoun, or *there,* but in the question tag, it must be either a personal pronoun, *there*, or *one*" (2006, p. 283). According to Algeo (2006), the typical structure of a tag question is either (1) an affirmative statement followed by a negative question tag, or (2) a negative statement followed by an affirmative question tag:

(1) *Paul **is** late,   **isn't** he?*
affirmative anchor   negative question tag

(2) *Jackie **can't** come,   **can** she?*
negative anchor   affirmative question tag

The term used to describe if a statement or a question tag is affirmative or negative is called *polarity* (Algeo, 2006). Although the structure outlined in the examples above is the basic one for tag questions, there also exists the possibility to form tag questions with constant polarity such as (3) an affirmative statement followed by an affirmative tag or (4) a negative statement followed by a negative tag:

(3) *So you think **I'm** silly, **do** you?*
affirmative anchor   affirmative question tag

(4) *You **don't** like my cooking, **don't** you?*
negative anchor   negative question tag

Tag questions with constant affirmative polarity, such as in (3), are relatively common in spoken English and frequently employed when asking for confirmation of something which is assumed to be true by the speaker (Alego, 2006). Tag questions with constant negative polarity, such as in (4), are less common and "usually sound aggressive" to the listener (Swan, 2005, p.472).

The verb phrase of the preceding anchor is of central importance in the formation of a canonical question tag. Verbs in English can have one of two functions in a clause: as the *main verb* of the clause or as the *auxiliary verb* of the clause (Svartvik & Sager, 2005). Most verbs in the English language are main verbs. A main verb is a verb which can stand on its own in a clause:

*She **saw** him yesterday.*

*I **love** my new bass guitar.*

An auxiliary verb, on the other hand, can never occur alone in a clause (Svartvik & Sager, 2005). The functions of auxiliary verbs in a clause are many. Some functions are: formation of different tenses, negation and question formation. Examples of auxiliary verbs are *be*, *have*, *do*, *must* and *will*:

> *Right now, she **is** making a sandwich.* (progressive)

> *She **has** spoken French all day long.* (present perfect)

> ***Do** you like it?* (question)

> *He **does** not live in Norway.* (negation)

> *He **will** come later.* (future)

Three verbs in English can function both as main and auxiliary verbs. These are the verbs: *be*, *have* and *do*. Examples of these verbs with the *function of main verb* in the clause are:

> *Peter **is** furious.* (be)

> *He **has** a cat.* (have)

> *I **do** my chores every day.* (do)

Examples of these verbs with the *function of auxiliary verb* in the clause are:

> *He **was** fired yesterday.* (passive)

> *Julia **has** gone to her mother.* (present perfect)

> ***Did** he see it?* (question)

If the anchor contains an auxiliary verb, or *have* or *be* with the function of main verb in the clause, the same verb must be repeated in the question tag:

> *Andy **can** speak Spanish, **can't** he?*

> *She **hasn't** bought it, **has** she?*

> *His friend **is** Portuguese, **isn't** he?*

If the anchor only contains a main verb, this verb is not repeated in the question tag. Instead the tag is formed with the verb *do*:

> *You **live** in Madrid, **don't** you?*

> *Harriet **left** you, **didn't** she?*

The example sentences presented so far have been instances of tag questions with what is called *canonical question tags*. However, there exists another kind of question tag: the *invariant* one. In

order to form a grammatically correct canonical question tag one must take into account the person, number, aspect and mood of the preceding statement, whereas the invariant question tag remains the same regardless of the subject and verb of the preceding statement, the anchor. The invariant question tag is considered to be more nonstandard and colloquial than the canonical one (Algeo, 2006). Some examples of invariant question tags are *eh* and *innit*:

*He **is** out of his mind,*	***innit**?*
anchor	invariant question tag
Better late than never,	***eh**?*
anchor	invariant question tag

Tag questions are most common in colloquial speech, but sometimes also appear in informal writing (Swan, 2005). The most common purpose for using a spoken tag question is to "invite the hearer to respond in agreement with the speaker" (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2009, p.106). The meaning and purpose of a tag question can also be further modified by the intonation used by the speaker when making the utterance (Svartvik & Sager, 2005). With rising intonation, it sounds like a real question which requires the hearer to respond. However, if the intonation falls, it sounds more like a statement which does not require an informative answer:

You don't know where my keys are, do you? (rising intonation = a real question)

It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? (falling intonation = not a real question, rather a statement)

Tag questions also exist in Swedish and many other major Indo-European languages. In these languages, however, the question tags are of the invariant type such as the English *right* and *innit*, i.e. they are single words or fixed and fossilized phrases simply attached to an anchor:

*He is not here, **right?***
*Han är inte här, **eller hur?*** (Swedish)
*Er ist nicht hier, **nicht wahr?*** (German)
*No está aquí, **¿verdad?*** (Spanish)

The knowledge of invariant question tags, such as those above, in a learner's mother tongue might aid that learner in the production of invariant question tags in English. However, as will be discussed in the next section, as an aid in the formation of canonical question tags, they offer very little support.

2.2 First language influence

In the 1950s an interest arose among linguists to look for, and try to predict how the first language of a language learner affected the acquisition of other languages (Lightbown & Spada, 2008). The central assumptions of this theory, called *contrastive analysis*, are that a learner's first language greatly influences the process of second language acquisition, and that ”learners will have less difficulty acquiring target language patterns that are similar to those of the first language than those that are different” (Lightbown & Spada, 2008, p. 197). It was therefore considered that a careful analysis of the contrasts between the first language (L1) and the second language being learned (L2) could be used as an effective tool to facilitate language acquisition by pin-pointing the problem areas of learners of a particular language (Tornberg, 2009).

”The influence of a learner's first language knowledge in the second language” is called *transfer* or *interference* (Lightbown & Spada, 2008, p. 205). There are two types of language transfer: *positive transfer,* which occurs when a structure or a rule from the first language (L1) aids in the production of a correct utterance in the second language (L2), and *negative transfer*, which happens when a structure or rule from the L1 transferred to the L2 produces an incorrect or inappropriate utterance in the L2. It is generally considered easier to learn a L2 which shares many features with the L1 (Lightbown & Spada, 2008). The reason for this is that positive transfer facilitates learning rules and structures in the L2 if the same rules and structures also exist in the L1. If the L2, however, has a feature which is not present in the L1, the learner of the L2 has to learn a new rule and structure without any help from his or her previous linguistic knowledge. An example of positive transfer from Swedish to English can be found in the following sentences in which the Swedish sentence pattern can used to produce a correct English utterance:

Jag har köpt mjölk.

I have bought milk.

Har du köpt mjölk?

Have you bought milk?

In these examples, the Swedish learner of English is greatly aided by his or her previous knowledge of Swedish since the word order is similar in Swedish and English when using the present perfect in both declarative and interrogative sentences. In German, such a transfer from Swedish (L1) into German (L2) would produce the following sentences:

Jag har köpt mjök.

* Ich habe gekauft Milch.

Har du köpt mjölk?

* Hast du gekauft Milch?

In the German examples above, the influence of Swedish has caused a negative transfer to occur since in German the past participle of the verb is always placed at the very end of the sentence:

Ich habe Milch gekauft.

Hast du Milch gekauft?

Transfers such as those above are quite common among learners of German. Transfers of question tags from Swedish to English also occur in the speech of Swedish learners of English and might produce incorrect utterances such as:

** He is buying bananas, **or**?*

Such direct translations of invariant question tags from the first language to the second language indicate that the learner is aware of the need for a question tag in the utterance, but does not yet possess the knowledge to discern a transferred question tag from an idiomatic one.

2.3 Developmental sequences in a second language

During the 1950s and 1960s many scientists started to question behaviorist-influenced language acquisition theories by putting forth the notion that language was not merely "a set of automatic habits, but a set of structured rules" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 121). Evidence to support this claim was found in observed situations in which it was demonstrated that children despite hearing the correct forms of language continued to use the incorrect forms which corresponded to their own internalized set of language rules (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The following example provided by Gass and Selinker (2008, p121) illustrates how the child continues to use the regular past tense ending *-ed* despite being corrected by the adult:

> From Cazden (1972, p.92; no age given)
> Child: My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.
> Adult: Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?
> Child: Yes.
> Adult: What did you say she did?
> Child: She holded the baby rabbits and we patted them.
> Adult: Did you say she held them tightly
> Child: No, she holded them loosely.

The evidence gathered from observations such as these gave support to claim that children's language displayed a great deal of systematicity and should be considered as its own language

system and not merely as a "deviation from the language they were exposed to" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p.122). These and similar observations led researchers such as for example Roger Brown to view language acquisition in a new way.

In 1973 Brown (1973) carried out a study in which he studied how three children acquired inflectional morphemes in English. His research showed that although the emergence and acquisition of the different inflectional morphemes did not always occur at the same age among the children, they followed a fairly consistent and predictable order. The results from Brown's investigation revealed that "the emergence of grammatical morphemes was consistent" among the children and "could be related to their overall development" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 36). Brown also discovered that the order of morpheme acquisition did not reflect the frequency of these morphemes in the speech produced by the children's parents or other people in their surroundings (Gass & Selinker, 2008). The morphemes which Brown investigated and the order in which they were acquired by the three children in the study can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Order of morpheme acquisition in English as a first language (Brown, 1973, p. 274)

1. Present progressive (*-ing*)
2/3. *in, on*
4. Plural (*-s*)
5. Past irregular
6. Possessive *(-'s)*
7. Uncontractible copula (*is, am, are*)
8. Articles (*a, the*)
9. Past regular (*-ed*)
10. Third person regular (*-s*)
11. Third person irregular
12. Uncontractible auxiliary
13. Contractible copula
14. Contractible auxiliary

Gass and Selinker (2008) provide some reasons for why this particular order of acquisition exists and not another. They mention, for example, that it is likely that the possessive '*s* is acquired before the past tense *-ed* because "the possessive ending '*s* is used without exception, whereas the past tense *-ed* has exceptions in irregular verbs" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p.36).

Like first language learners, also second language learners tend to follow certain developmental sequences when learning a language and "what is learned early by one is learned

early by others" (Lightbown & Spada, 2008, p.82). Researchers such as Steven Krashen have in their studies found results that indicate that second language learners of English, from *different* first language backgrounds, pass through the same developmental sequence (a sequence which is almost identical to the one of young English speaking children) when learning English (Lightbown & Spada, 2008). Evidence such as this indicates that the order of acquisition of English language features can not be explained as interference from the learner's first language since that would suggest that speakers of different languages would have their own sequences of development. It has been shown, however, that speakers of a language which shares similar features as the target language have an easier time of learning it than speakers of a language where that feature is absent (Lightbown & Spada, 2008). German, Swedish and Dutch, for example, all have a possessive form similar to the English possessive *-'s,* and speakers of these languages should not have any difficulty learning this feature of English since they are used to it from their own languages. On the other hand, even highly proficient Russian speakers of English struggle with the definite article *the* since their own language lacks such a feature (Lightbown & Spada, 2008). The results from Krashen's study on second language grammatical morpheme acquisition are summarized in Table 2, which is an adaption of   from Lightbown and Spada (2008, p. 84). The table should be read as showing that learners of English are likely to acquire and produce morphemes found in the higher boxes before those in the lower boxes. Within the same box, however, there is no clear difference in the accuracy of how the morphemes are produced.

Table 2: An adaption of Krashen's (1977) summary of second language grammatical morpheme acquisition sequence from Lightbown & Spada(2008, p.84)

Progressive (*-ing*) Plural Copula (*to be*)
Auxiliary (progressive as in *He is going*) Article
Irregular past
Regular past *-ed* Third person singular *-s* Possessive *-'s*

In the 1980s, the acquisition of questions by learners of English from different language backgrounds was investigated by Manfred Pienemann and his colleagues. The results from their investigation indicated that the first language of the learners holds some importance in the acquistion of questions, however, the overall developmental sequence is similar among all of the

learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2008). According to Pienemann's investigation, question tags were among the last questions mastered by learners of English in their acquistion of English questions. The investigation showed that before acquiring question tags, the participants in his study had already acquired many other questions such as (5) *do*-fronting and (6) *wh-* + copula:

(5) Do you like candy?

(6) Where is the apple?

Studies such as this support the theory of an interlanguage shared by learners of English, a learner language with its own language rules, yet dynamic since it changes over time as learners receive more language input and revise the rules and hypotheses about the language.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Subject-verb agreement in declarative sentences

In order to investigate the pupil's command of subject-verb agreement in declarative sentences the pupils were asked to complete two assignments: a cloze test and translation from Swedish to English. In the cloze test the pupils were given 7 incomplete sentences which they had to complete by writing the correct form of the English verb written in Swedish in brackets (see Appendix: Test 1). The results of the cloze test can be found in Table 3. In the translation test the pupils were asked to translate 7 sentences from Swedish to English (see Appendix: Test 1). The results from this section of the test can be found in Table 4.

Table 3: Comparison of frequency and score of correct subject-verb agreement between pupils in the 6th and 9th grade: Cloze test

Sentences	Total number of correct usage (Total number of pupils)		Total number of errors (Total number of pupils)		Accuracy score in percentage	
	Grade 6	*Grade 9*	*Grade 6*	*Grade 9*	*Grade 6*	*Grade 9*
Maria *lives* in London with her mum and dad.	8 (22)	22 (23)	14 (22)	1 (23)	36	96
She *drinks* tea every day.	14 (22)	22 (23)	8 (22)	1 (23)	64	96
My parents *have* a house in Stockholm.	17 (22)	18 (23)	5 (22)	5 (23)	77	78
Paula and Jim *eat* too many sweets.	6 (22)	5 (23)	16 (22)	17 (23)	27	22
Laura *is* my best friend.	17 (22)	23 (23)	5 (22)	0 (23)	77	100
He *sings* with his sister in a band.	9 (22)	22 (23)	13 (22)	1 (23)	41	96
We *are* not going to Spain this year.	21 (22)	22 (23)	1 (22)	1 (23)	95	96

The cloze test contained 7 sentences and tested the pupils on their command of when to use the present tense third person singular -*s* and the verb *to be*. The pupils in the 9th grade showed a greater command of subject-verb agreement in the case of the third person singular -*s*. However, they frequently overgeneralized the use of the third person -*s* in the sentence *Paula and Jim eat too many sweets* by writing **eats* instead of *eat*. The overgeneralization of this feature indicates that the 9th grade pupils are quite aware of the fact that proper names refer to an entity in the third person singular, and therefore should have the third person -*s*. In the mentioned sentence, however, the majority of the 9th grade pupils incorrectly identified the subject to be in the singular when it should actually be in the plural, and therefore not carry the third person singular -*s*.

Table 4: Comparison of frequency and score of correct subject-verb agreement between pupils in the 6th and 9th grade: Translation

Sentences	Total number of correct translations (Total number of pupils)		Total number of incorrect translations (Total number of pupils)		Accuracy score in percentage	
	Grade 6	Grade 9	Grade 6	Grade 9	Grade 6	Grade 9
I *drink/am drinking* water.	15 (22)	21 (23)	7 (22)	2 (23)	68	91
My dog *is* black and white.	21 (22)	23 (23)	1 (22)	0 (23)	95	100
You *are* my best friend.	20 (22)	23 (23)	2 (22)	0 (23)	91	100
Julia *loves* the houses in England.	11 (22)	21 (23)	11 (22)	2 (23)	50	91
Anders and Klara *speak/are speaking* English.	9 (22)	10 (23)	13 (22)	13 (23)	41	43
I *am* very happy.	21 (22)	23 (23)	1 (22)	0 (23)	95	100
She *has* a house in Miami.	13 (22)	20 (23)	9 (22)	3 (23)	59	87

Test 1 (see Appendix) contained 7 sentences in Swedish which the pupils were supposed to translate into English. These sentences were elaborated to test them further on their command of the present tense third person singular -*s* and the verb *to be*. Both groups showed a good command of the different present tense forms of the verb *to be*. A great deal of the pupils in the 6th grade did not know how and when to use the third person -*s* as can be indicated by their overgeneralization of the forms *love* and *have* in the sentences *Julia loves the houses in England* and *She has a house in Miami*. Both pupil groups demonstrated an overgeneralization of the third person -*s* in the sentence *Anders and Klara speak/are speaking English*. Once again many pupils were not able to correctly identify the subject of the sentence as being in the plural. In the formation of a canonical question tag, the subject-verb agreement present in the anchor must be reproduced in the tag, as can be seen in the sentence ***He lives** abroad, **doesn't he?*** Failure to observe and adhere to the concord of the anchor leads to the production of an incorrect question tag.

3.2 Auxiliary verbs and the verb *to be* to form interrogative sentences

In order to investigate the pupils' ability to form interrogative sentences with the help of auxiliary verbs and the verb *to be,* the pupils´ were asked to translate 7 questions from Swedish into English. These questions required different auxiliaries or the verb *to be.* In addition they also required the pupils to employ the concord between the subject and the verb. The results of this section of Test 1 can be found in Table 5.

Table 5: Comparison of frequency and score of correct interrogative sentences with auxiliary verbs and the verb to be

Sentences	Total number of correct interrogative sentences (Total number of pupils)		Total number of incorrect interrogative sentences (Total number of pupils)		Accuracy score in percentage	
	Grade 6	*Grade 9*	*Grade 6*	*Grade 9*	*Grade 6*	*Grade 9*
Does he live in Sweden?	12 (22)	18 (23)	10 (22)	5 (23)	55	78
Do you have a bike?	20 (22)	22 (23)	2 (22)	1 (23)	91	96
Have you seen my sister?	18 (22)	23 (23)	4 (22)	0 (23)	82	100
Are you Petra's friend?	21 (22)	23 (23)	1 (22)	0 (23)	95	100
Where ***do*** Laura and Maria live?	2 (22)	13 (23)	20 (22)	9 (23)	9	57
Has your dog jumped in the pool?	4 (22)	7 (23)	18 (22)	16 (23)	18	30
Is Martin your friend?	14 (22)	18 (23)	8 (22)	5 (23)	64	78

In general, the pupils in the 9th grade showed a greater ability to form interrogative sentences than the pupils in the 6th grade. Many pupils in both groups had difficulty with the sentence *Where do Laura and Maria live?* Most of them utilized *does*, once again not being able to identify the correct subject of the clause. Most students overgeneralized the use of *have* instead of *has* in the sentence *Has your dog jumped in the pool?* In the sentences *Have you seen my sister?* and *Do you have a bike?* most pupils answered correctly, indicating that they had a good grasp on how to form questions with these verbs when they could use the base form of a verb. It is evident from the results in Table 4, however, that most pupils were not able to correctly identify when they needed to employ the third person singular –s in a sentence. They missed many of the indications in the text for when they were supposed to use the –s form of the verb. This led to them overgeneralizing the use of the base form of the different verbs in the test. It is interesting to note that pupils in both groups more readily identify *he* as requiring third person -s than *your dog*. The reason for this might be that many pupils have been told that they are supposed to use that form after the pronouns *he, she* and *it*. These third person singular pronouns seem to be a clearer signal to the pupils that they must use the –s form of the verb. In the context of this study, the pupils' ability to form interrogative sentences is of some interest since the formation of these is similar to the formation of canonical

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question tags. In the formation of both question tags and interrogative sentences, concord, reversed word order and choice of verb are important to produce a correct utterance in English.

3.3 Canonical question tags with reverse polarity

The primary aim of this study was to investigate a group of Swedish pupil's command of canonical question tags with reverse polarity. In order to reach this aim, 45 pupils were asked to complete a set of unfinished sentences with the appropriate question tags. The constraints placed upon these question tags were that they were made up of the verb of the preceding clause, followed by a pronoun whose antecedent was the subject of the preceding clause and with reverse polarity to the preceding clause. The results from this test (see Appendix) can be found in Table 6.

Table 6: Comparison of frequency and score of correct canonical question tags with reverse polarity

Sentences	Total number of correct tags (Total number of pupils)		Total number of errors (Total number of pupils)		Accuracy score in percentage	
	Grade 6	*Grade 9*	*Grade 6*	*Grade 9*	*Grade 6*	*Grade 9*
It is late, **isn't** it?	9 (22)	10 (23)	13 (22)	13 (23)	41	43
Peter has lived in Spain many years, **hasn't** he?	1 (22)	7 (23)	21 (22)	16 (23)	5	30
You are my best friend, **aren't** you?	2 (22)	8 (23)	20 (22)	15 (23)	9	35
He isn't sleeping, **is** he?	1 (22)	8 (23)	21 (22)	15 (23)	5	35
You go to school, **don't** you?	8 (22)	3 (23)	14 (22)	20 (23)	36	13
They are washing their car, **aren't** they?	1 (22)	6 (23)	21 (22)	17 (23)	5	26
You can come later, **can't** you?	3 (22)	6 (23)	19 (22)	17 (23)	14	26
Katarina will not go to Malmö, **will** she.	0 (22)	7 (23)	22 (22)	16 (23)	0	30
They have eaten hamburgers, **haven't** they?	2 (22)	8 (23)	20 (22)	15 (23)	9	35
Oliver loves France, **doesn't** he?	3 (22)	4 (23)	19 (22)	19 (23)	14	17
They came home late, **didn't** they?	2 (22)	4 (23)	20 (22)	19 (23)	9	17
Ingrid has gone to the cinema, **hasn't** she?	1 (22)	5 (23)	21 (22)	18 (23)	5	22
Adam can't speak Swedish, **can** he?	2 (22)	7 (23)	20 (22)	16 (23)	9	30
It will be great, **won't** it?	1 (22)	3 (23)	21 (22)	19 (23)	5	13
She cut her finger yesterday, **didn´t** she?	4 (22)	5 (23)	18 (22)	18 (23)	18	22
He hasn´t got a car, **has** he?	2 (22)	7 (23)	20 (22)	16 (23)	9	30
Michael should pass the test, **shouldn't** he?	1 (22)	6 (23)	21 (22)	17 (23)	5	26
Anna and Peter live in New York, **don't** they?	5 (22)	2 (23)	17 (22)	21 (23)	23	9
He doesn't like One Direction, **does** he?	3 (22)	4 (23)	19 (22)	19 (23)	14	17

The results from table 5 will be discussed in great detail in the next section where the pupils' results will be analyzed according to the verb used in the question tag.

3.4 Analysis of the pupils' performance

In this section, the pupils' responses will be analyzed and discussed. The question tags are divided into four groups: tags with *to be*, tags with *to do*, tags with *to have*, and tags with modal verbs. Invariant question tags such as *right* and *you know* were given frequently by the pupils, indicating that they understood the need for some type of question tag in the context of the sentence, but did not know how to form a canonical one. Many pupils used the coordinating conjunction *or,* either by itself or by providing a short phrase including *or:*

> * *He doesn't like One Direction, or?*

> * *Oliver lives in France, or does he?*

This is likely interference from the Swedish language which has the frequently used question tag *eller.* Invariant question tags and question tags which did not adhere to the required structure of a canonical question tag with reverse polarity were not considered successful.

3.4.1 Question tags with the verb *to be*

Five sentences in the test required a form of *to be* in the question tag. In the test, the tag question which most pupils managed to complete correctly was *It is late, isn't it?* Many of the pupils completed the sentence with the question tag *is it,* demonstrating that they had correctly identified the verb and subject of the preceding clause, but not the need to reverse the polarity of the question tag. It is interesting to observe, therefore, that fewer pupils were able to complete the tag question *He isn't sleeping, is he?* Some pupils completed this sentence with the question tag *isn't he,* and by so doing indicating that they were not aware of the need to reverse the polarity. It is possible that the high number of successful uses of the question tag *isn't it?* can be attributed to the fact that it is the most commonly used question tag in both British and American English, it is three times more frequent than the next most common question tag *is it?* (Tottie & Hoffmann, 2006).

3.4.2 Question tags with the verb *to do*

Six of the sentences in the test required a form of *to do* in the question tag. The 9th grade pupils had most difficulty with the auxiliary verb *to do,* the 6th grade pupils actually surpassed them when providing the question tag in the sentence *You go to school, don't you?* Overall, the younger students performed best when providing question tags including the auxiliary *do* whereas the older pupils performed worst when using this verb. It was mentioned previously in the present study that if the anchor of a tag question contains an auxiliary verb, or a non-auxiliary *be* or *have*, this verb

must be repeated in the question tag such as in the following sentences: *He has lived in Spain, hasn't he?* and *She is clever, isn't she?* However, if the anchor only contains a main verb this verb is not repeated in the question tag but is replaced by the auxiliary *to do,* such as in the sentence *They love their cat, don't they?* As can be gathered from the previous examples, the anchor provides fewer clues, and thus less aid in the construction of the corresponding question tag. Many pupils in both groups used variations of the verb *to be* instead of *to do* when forming their question tags. This resulted in errors such as:

Anna and Peter live in New York, aren't they?

* *Oliver loves France, isn't he?*

These and similar examples were given by some of the pupils in grade 9.They indicate that the pupils were aware of reverse polarity in question tags, but they did not know which verb to employ in the question tag. It is possible that the older pupils had more difficulty with these question tags than the others since they could not repeat the verb in the preceding clause. If the assumption is made that older Swedish pupils have a greater command of English grammar in general, and of subject-verb agreement in particular, the case might be made that their knowledge worked against them in this particular instance. Their knowledge of the importance of concord in English might have made them focus exclusively on this aspect when forming their question tags, which in general were correct regarding the agreement between subject and verb. A similar pattern can be observed in young children who at a certain age gradually start to overegeneralize the use of regular past *-ed* in place of the irregular past verb forms. Such a child would, for example, start producing incorrect utterances such as (8) instead of correct ones like (7), even though it previously only used the correct forms:

(7) Yesterday, I bought some candy.

*(8) * Yesterday, I buyed some candy.*

The reasons for such errors of overgeneralization lie in the fact that children at a certain age start to notice the regularities of certain recurring forms, such as the aforementioned *-ed*. They then make the quite logical assumption that the previous irregular verb forms they have learned are incorrect, and start to replace them with regular forms such as **buyed* instead of *bought* and **goed* instead of *went*. A similar process might explain why the 9th grade pupils had such difficulties with question tags containing *to do*. They were aware of the fact that the verb in the question tag had to mirror that of the anchor. However, they must have realized that such a repetition would produce unacceptable utterances such as:

* *Oliver loves France, loves he not?*

Quite a high number of pupils in grade 6 managed to provide a form of *to do* when completing the tag question which required it. A possible explanation might be that their lack of experience with the language forced them to listen less to their formal knowledge of English grammar, and more to their own linguistic intuition, an intuition honed by years of being exposed to English in different forms. Another possible explanation as to why the pupils in grade 6 did better than the pupils in grade 9 when completing these question tags might be because the pupils in grade 6 are in the process of learning how to form interrogative sentences with the verb *to do*. The fact that they are working with the formation of *do*-questions might therefore explain their familiarity with the verb in the context of using it when forming questions.

3.4.3 Question tags with the verb *to have*

In the test, 4 tag questions required a form of the verb *to have* in the tag. The overgeneralization of *have* instead of *has* was quite frequent among the pupils' responses. In the tag question *He hasn't got a car, has he?* more pupils employed the correct form of *to have* than in the similar *Peter has lived in Spain many years, hasn't he?* A likely cause for this is the pronoun *he* which they know entails the compulsory use of the third person singular *-s* in the present tense. The test results in the two groups were quite consistent with those of the verb *to be*.

3.4.4 Question tags with the modal verbs *can, will, should*

Modal verbs were required in 4 of the question tags of the test. The pupils' results indicated that they did not seem to have more difficulties when completing tag questions with the modal verbs *can* and *should* than when completing those with *to be* and *to have*. The modal verb *will*, proved a bit more complicated for the pupils. None among the younger pupils managed to complete the tag question *Katarina will not go to Malmö, will she?* In response to this question they provided answers such as:

> ** Katarina will not go to Malmö, why not?*

> ** Katarina will not go to Malmö, please can you come?*

> ** Katarina will not go to Malmö, don´t she?*

The older pupils' test results when providing the question tag which contained *will* were consistent with those of other modals, *to be* and *to have*, however, they displayed more uncertainty when providing the negative polarity question tag for the tag question *It will be great, won't it?* They gave responses such as the following when completing the tag question:

> ** It will be great, will it?*

> ** It will be great, or?*

It is possible that difference in spelling between *will* and *won't* contributed to the pupils' inability to complete this question tag. It does not explain, however, why they did not provide more answers with the longer form *will it not*, such as in the following example: *It will be great, will it not?*

4. Pedagogical aspects

A crucial source of information for any language learner is corrective feedback which provides the learner with advice on how to make further progress (Gass & Selinker, 2008). In order for the feedback to be as useful as possible it should be detailed, focused on only one area of improvement and provided to the learner in close proximity to the task at hand, preferably even during the learning process (Lundahl, 2010). However, since learners of a second language, like first language learners, pass through stages of development when acquiring a new language (Brown, 1973; Lightbown & Spada, 2008), it is not certain that they are receptive to feedback that relates to the acquisition of such language features for which they are not yet ready. As we could see in the earlier example of a parent and child speaking about what had happened at the child's school (p. 9), the child was not yet ready to be instructed on how to use the past irregular form of the verb *to hold*. Regardless of the parent's effort at that stage, it was unlikely that the child would learn how to use that particular form at that particular stage of language learning.

Insights such as these present language teachers with the dour fact that many of their efforts will be in vain since many of their pupils will not yet be ready for the corrective feedback provided by their teacher. A teacher of any language has to take into account the fact that his or her pupils will pass through the developmental sequences at different rates. The consequence of this is that some students will always be ahead of what is being taught at that point in time and some will always be behind. Because of the heterogeneous nature of any group of language learners it is of the utmost importance that the teacher provides his or her pupils with a mix of activities which can range from grammatical drills to speed dating to writing short stories. By varying the activities in the classroom the teacher will hopefully always be able to provide every pupil with new knowledge and relevant feedback for the level at which the student is at. It is therefore important for language teachers to have a solid knowledge not only of the language they are teaching, but also of different theories and methods about language learning.

Armed with such knowledge, language teachers are hopefully able to provide answers to questions such as:

- What is the most efficient way to provide feedback?
- Which errors should be corrected through feedback?
- Which errors should be left alone for the moment and corrected later?

Recent studies, like for example Lundahl (2010), have shown the importance of corrective feedback in the acquisition of knowledge and proficiency in any school subject. Through such an analytical and theorethically grounded method of providing feedback, it is likely that learners will be able to benefit the most from the instruction given and reach the highest of their potential. In the teaching and learning of tag questions, teachers have a good opportunity to help their pupils get a better grasp of concord in general by first showing it to them in the anchor, and then explaining to them the need to reproduce the same concord in the tag. By learning to identify concord in a sentence and then producing a correct tag, the pupils are given a practical application of their knowledge of concord which helps them develop their command of not only one, but two important areas of the English language: concord and tag questions.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate a group of Swedish pupils' command of canonical question tags with reverse polarity in written English at different stages of learning. The results showed that command of subject-verb agreement in declarative and interrogative sentences did not lead to command of canonical question tags with reverse polarity. However, those pupils who showed good command of question tags also had a good command of subject-verb agreement. The reverse polarity required in many of the tag questions was problematic for most pupils. It showed that many pupils who managed well with the formation of question tags with the correct pronoun and verb were not aware of the need to reverse the polarity of the tag. It is likely that a similar test which only required the pupils to respond with question tags with positive polarity would yield quite different results, since the pupils' overgeneralisation of question tags with positive polarity would not be a cause for errors. The pupils had least difficulty with the question tags which required the verbs *to be* and *to have*. The pupils in grade 6 showed their best test results when completing tag questions which required the verb *to do*. Conversely, this verb caused the 9th grade pupils the most difficulty. On average, the pupils in grade 9 had a better command of question tags than the pupils in grade 6. The test results of many of the 9th grade pupils, however, indicated that they had not yet mastered question tags with reverse polarity, but were still in the process of acquiring this language feature.

This is a small-scale study and its results can not be used to draw any general conclusions regarding Swedish pupils' command of canonical question tags. An additional and valuable insight from the study, was the comparison at two different stages of learning of the pupils' command of subject-verb agreement and the formation of interrogative sentences. Findings such as these can prove useful when tailoring activities and excercises which aim to teach grammar since they are able to take into account the problem areas which many of the older pupils have not yet mastered.

It would be interesting to carry out further research on Swedish pupils' command of question tags. A possible approach would be to compare two groups at the same stage of learning where one group is taught about canonical question tags explicitly through excercises and grammar drills, and the other group is exposed to a great deal of language input which contains question tags in both written and spoken forms such as written dialogues in plays and scenes from movies. Such a study could show whether explicit or implicit methods of instruction work better when learning and mastering this feature of the English language.

TEST 1

Årskurs: 6 ☐   Kön: Flicka ☐   Kod: ___ - ___

9 ☐   Pojke ☐

A)   Skriv klart dessa meningar med verbet inom parentes.

1. Maria …......................... (bor) in London with her mum and dad.
2. She …....................... (dricker) tea every day.
3. My parents …......................... (har) a house in Stockholm.
4. Paula and Jim …....................... (äter) too many sweets.
5. Laura …..................... (är) my best friend?
6. He …..................... (sjunger) with his sister in a band.
7. We …..................... (är) not going to Spain this year.

B)   Översätt dessa meningar från svenska till engelska.

1. Jag dricker vatten.   …..…..........................
2. Min hund är svart och vit.   …..…....................
3. Du är min bästa kompis.   …..…....................
4. Julia älskar husen i England. …..….................
5. Anders och Klara pratar engelska. …..….............
6. Jag är väldigt glad idag.   …...... …..…...........
7. Hon har ett hus i Miami.   …..…....................

C)   Översätt dessa frågor från svenska till engelska.

1. Bor han i Sverige?   …..….............
2. Har du en cykel?   …..….............
3. Har du sett min syster?   …..….............
4. Är du Petras kompis?   …..….............
5. Var bor Laura och Maria?   …..….............
6. Har din hund hoppat i poolen? …..….............
7. Är Martin din kompis?   …..….............

TEST 2

A)   Skriv klart följande meningar genom att lägga till en påhängsfråga.

→ *Se exemplet i fråga 1 före du börjar!*

1. **They don´t like us,** …..........*do they*...............?
2. It is late, …..?
3. Peter has lived in Spain many years, …..?
4. You are my best friend, …..?
5. He isn't sleeping, …......................................?

6. You go to school, …...................................?
7. They are washing their car, …....................................?
8. You can come later, …...............................?
9. Katarina will not go to Malmö, …...................................?
10. They have eaten the hamburgers, …....................................?

11. Oliver loves France, …...............................?
12. They came home late, …...........................?
13. Ingrid has gone to the cinema, …..............................?
14. Adam can't speak Swedish, …..........................?
15. It will be great, …..............................?

16. She cut her finger yesterday, …...................................?
17. He hasn't got a car, …...........................?
18. Michael should pass the test, …..............................?
19. Anna and Peter live in New York, …..................................?
20. He doesn't like One Direction, …..............................?

Hej!

Jag är student på Göteborgs universitet och denna termin skriver jag mitt examensarbete i engelska. Jag arbetar även som lärare på Hovåsskolan och jag är intresserad av att göra en undersökning med elever i årskurs 6 och 9 för att se hur säkra elever i dessa två årskurser är på att skriva olika slags frågor på engelska. Anledningen till att jag har valt detta tema för min uppsats är för att jag vill få en större förståelse för vilka svårigheter elever i årskurs 6 och 9 har när de skriver frågor på engelska. Eleverna kommer att skriva ett kort test som beräknas ta 10-15 minuter. Resultaten från detta test kommer sedan att ligga som underlag för min studie.

Ert barn kommer inte att medverka med namn och allt material i studien kommer att behandlas konfidentiellt. Inte heller skolan kommer att namnges i studien. Ingenting i uppsatsen kommer att kunna användas för att identifiera vare sig ert barn eller skolan som ert barn går på. Medverkan i studien är frivillig och ni har rätt att när som helst dra er ur undersökningen. Om ni inte önskar att ert barn ska delta i undersökningen ber jag er kontakta mig och underrätta mig om detta.

Har ni några frågor är ni välkomna att kontakta mig eller min handledare Pia Köhlmyr.

Många vänliga hälsningar,
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