



# Using Supplemental Instruction for Teaching English Grammar

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## Abstract

*Supplemental instruction (SI) usually means students helping and tutoring younger peers in courses or difficult parts of courses. In the English department, at Uppsala University, a different form of supplemental instruction has been implemented. The tutoring is still there but supplemental instruction is included in the high school student teachers' course in English language structure and linguistics and consists of teaching English grammar. The SI leaders are future high school teachers in their third term of English, and they teach or tutor student teachers in their first term (the future primary school teachers). The initial aim was to make sure that the students continue to be interested in grammar, since they have already studied it for two terms. Trying out teaching and explaining grammar was something new and definitely relevant to their future careers. The teaching of grammar through SI has been very much welcomed by students at the English department. They point out that through SI they have become more interested, not only in grammar and teaching it in the future, but also in writing about the importance of grammar and grammar teaching in their research papers. The status of grammar teaching needs to be raised in Swedish schools, since there is a widespread opinion that grammar teaching is outdated and something you can do without.*

**Keywords:** *Supplemental instruction, SI leaders, high school student teachers, grammar teaching*

## 1. Introduction: A special form of *supplemental instruction*

*Supplemental instruction (SI)* is practised at most universities all over the world and may be understood as support given by students to improve younger peers' success in courses or in particularly difficult parts of courses. Several teachers and researchers have reported on the effectiveness of supplemental instruction in different learner groups (see for example, [1] and [2]). In the English department at Uppsala, a special form of SI has been used. It is part of the future high school teachers' course in language structure and linguistics. In this paper I outline the form of SI that I have implemented and describe its impact on students' interest in grammar.

The SI leaders are student teachers in their third term of English. The purpose of introducing SI was to get the students interested in grammar, not only by studying more grammar in the third term, but also by trying out teaching and explaining grammar (see [3]). The high school student teachers, i.e., the SI leaders, teach, or tutor, first term students in English grammar, phraseology and sentence structure. The first term students are future primary school teachers. This group of students was chosen because their grammar course is more practical and contrastive and not very different from what the SI leaders themselves will teach in the future. The material used was the SI leaders' course book, [4] and various chapters from handbooks on how to teach English grammar. Also, I provided important articles from educational journals for background reading for the SI leaders, see [5], [6] and [7].

Grammar teaching is not generally focused on in Swedish schools or in the curricula from the Swedish National Agency for Education, see [8]. There is a widespread opinion among teachers and students that grammar teaching is outdated and unnecessary. In a survey on English grammar teaching in senior high schools in Uppsala ([9]), most teachers commented that traditional grammar teaching has more or less disappeared. They teach grammar primarily by providing feedback on students' written work (for further information on teachers' attitudes to grammar teaching, see for example, [10] and [11]).

## 2. English as L3 in Swedish schools

It is important to note the multicultural and multilingual learning environment that exists in Sweden and that teaching English must be adjusted to ethnically diverse classrooms. These language classrooms can consist of students who learn English not as a second language (for many students, this is Swedish) but as a third language; see [12] and naturally the grammar teaching must take this into account. In many cases, typological closeness (see [13]) is the most important factor, which means



that L2 Swedish influences L3 English to a greater extent than the students' L1s. Tutoring students with English as an L3 was practiced within supplemental instruction, since there is a growing population of university students with different L1s than Swedish. To prepare for this, the SI leaders consulted a handbook [14], which includes around twenty-five different languages as well as problems that the L1 speakers of these languages could feasibly have when learning English. Several SI leaders in my study had some or a good knowledge of for example, Arabic or Persian themselves.

### 3. A learner English corpus

Another result of the high school student teachers' increased interest through SI in teaching grammar is the compilation of a learner English corpus. The student teachers were interested in studying what grammar errors occurred in their future students' writing in order to know what to focus on in their teaching and to write about these grammatical problems in their research papers. During their school placement the student teachers collected essays which were made into a corpus of learner English, *The Uppsala Learner English Corpus*, or *ULEC*. The corpus consists of essays from Swedish junior and senior high school students aged between 12 and 19, and from school years 6 to 12 (for a more detailed description of the corpus, see [15]). The essays in ULEC have different topics and are between 200-300 words in length. The essays were written on computer without any supplementary tools such as spelling or grammar checkers. Currently, the corpus comprises approximately 300,000 words.

### 4. Do Swedish high school students know any grammar?

Different student projects have tried to find an answer to the question of whether Swedish high school students know any grammar. The question was given an affirmative answer in many cases but in the essays from ULEC, errors were found, both at the junior and at the senior high school levels. The most common errors identified were incorrect use of the apostrophe (*the worlds radio programs*), article usage (*in USA, the society changes*), subject-verb agreement (*everybody understand*), incorrect orthography (*the second world war, english*) and conditional sentences (*If you like ghosts, I don't like you*). When comparing texts from ULEC with texts from a corpus of university students' English (*USE, Uppsala Students' English*, [16]), the errors were almost identical at university level. As a result, the same grammatical categories were focused on in the student teachers' teaching and tutoring as SI leaders. See Table 1 for a summary of the most frequent errors in the learner corpora. Conditional sentences constituted a major problem and hardly any correct constructions were found, not even at university level. The more complex form with the past perfective aspect and modality (*would have studied*) - that is, the third conditional - is rare. The only correct example of the third conditional from the ULEC data (with *should*) is from a year 9 student: *Because if they had been real someone should have seen it*.

Table 1. The most frequent errors in the learner corpora

	ULEC	USE
Subject-verb agreement	8/1000 words	2/1000 words
Article usage	8/1000 words	1/1000 words
Conditional sentences	6/1000 words	3/1000 words
Writing the apostrophe	10/1000 words	1/1000 words
Sample size	13750 words	15740 words

Conditional sentences were particularly focused on in the SI leaders' teaching and tutoring. Not only had the complexity of the constructions to be taken into account but also the issue of transfer from Swedish. Conditional sentences in Swedish are formed with *skulle* (very similar in sound and form to *should*, see [17] and the example above from a year 9 student).

In Table 2, the SI leaders' evaluation of supplemental instruction as a part of their own grammar course is summarized. All students thought they had revised and studied grammar in a good way and twenty-three out of twenty-five students answered that "[they] enjoyed explaining grammar and seeing that the students understood".

Table 2: The high school students' opinions about the value of supplemental instruction (based on 25 students)

I have become more interested in studying grammar	21/25
I will focus more on grammar in my future teaching	19/25



I will show my students that it is important to know grammar	19/25
I have become more interested in doing research about the value of knowing grammar and the importance of teaching grammar	22/25
I have revised and studied grammar in a good way	25/25
I enjoyed explaining grammar and seeing that the students understood	23/25

## 5. Conclusion

As SI leaders, the high school student teachers get to do several things that are important and relevant to their careers: they have to revise grammar and they have to think about how to explain grammar (the level and the usage of terminology). Certain features, such as conditional sentences, were a challenge to teach both as regards explanations and the time required for the presentation and the feedback. In their evaluation of SI, the high school student teachers pointed out that, through SI, they have become more interested, not only in grammar and how to teach it, but also in writing about the importance of grammar and grammar teaching in their research papers. As pointed out earlier, the initial aim was to get the student teachers, the SI leaders, more interested in grammar by trying out teaching and explaining grammar. What I found was that that these SI leaders gained a much better understanding of grammar, thereby developing confidence as well as improving literacy skills more broadly.

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