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Assessing the value of English 7 for L2 English reading development

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Abstract

In the third year of Swedish upper secondary school, students choose if they want to attend English 7; an optional course that incurs a credit increment which improves the chance of being admitted to university. The third-year course is the first that includes texts used in higher education and content of a scientific nature in the syllabus, yet the effects English 7 has on students' language proficiency and level of preparedness for reading course literature in English remain unexplored. In this mixed methods study, descriptive and inferential statistics are combined with qualitative content analysis to analyse questionnaire and interview data from more than 300 upper secondary school and university students. The results suggest English 7 appears to act as a bridge between upper secondary school with students who attended English 7 significantly better prepared to read course literature in English at university. However, English 7 is also perceived as an elite course that is not for everyone, with students who need it the most to improve their English opting not to attend, leading to the conclusion there is a need to reevaluate the role of English 7.

Introduction

Every academic year, around 90,000 students attend their first day in Swedish higher education. The vast majority of these higher education entrants are domestic students who have attended upper secondary school in Sweden (Söderman & Berg, 2022). During their studies, almost all of them will be expected to read course literature in English, as nearly half of the required reading in undergraduate courses with Swedish as the official language of instruction is in English (Malmström & Pecorari, 2022).

Sweden usually ranks amongst the countries with the highest English proficiency around the world (e.g., Dafouz & Smit, 2020), and as a result it may be logical to assume Swedish students have relatively few issues reading course literature in English; however, previous studies have showed that more than one third of first-year Swedish university students in social science struggle to comprehend their assigned reading (Eriksson, 2023a). More broadly, a majority of university students express negative attitudes toward academic texts in English (Eriksson, 2023a; Pecorari et al., 2011), with some students reporting they were unaware they would be required to read course literature in English (Eriksson, 2023b). This lack of awareness has likely impacted students' ability to make informed choices about whether to attend the optional year of English in upper secondary school (English 7) as preparation for university.

To be eligible for higher education in Sweden, students must have passed English 5 and 6, which they usually take in their first and second years of upper secondary school. In their third and final year, English 7 is offered as an option to most students but is only attended by around 36%[1]. In other words, domestic students who enter higher education belong to one of two large groups with different amounts of English instruction in school: one group that has attended English 7 and one group that has not. As emphasised by Macaro et al. (2018), more work is needed on the transition from secondary to tertiary education regarding differing levels of language proficiency and whether or not they lead to inequalities. The differences in language proficiency and level of preparedness for reading course literature in English between Swedish students who have attended English 7 and those who have not is an area that is previously unexplored but that might shed much needed light on the gap identified by Macaro et al. (2018). The present paper describes a sequential explanatory design (Creswell et al., 2003) involving upper secondary school and university students in social science programmes employed to address the following research questions:

1. Which students attend English 7, and what factors affect their decisions to do so?
2. Do students who attended English 7 display any differences in their self-reported perceptions of their a) ability to read for academic purposes in English, b) reading speed, and c) reading strategy use in comparison with students who only completed English 6?

3. Does completion of English 7 lead to higher levels of reported preparedness for reading course literature in English at university than completion of English 6? If so, for what reasons?

English in Swedish upper secondary school

During the three years of upper secondary school, students can attend three English courses: English 5, 6 and 7. Students on vocational programmes need a passing grade in English 5 to graduate, whereas students on preparatory programmes need a passing grade in English 6. To continue to university, English 6 is required and as a result, almost half of the students on vocational programmes who complete English 5 elect to take English 6 before finishing upper secondary school (Skolverket, 2022c). The third and final course is attended by around 2% of students on vocational programmes, which is in stark contrast with the approximately 37% of students on preparatory programmes who attend all three years of English (Skolverket, 2022c). When applying to university, university admissions calculates a merit rating for each applicant based on their previous upper secondary studies. In addition to the credit awarded for English 7 based on the grade a student receives, students who pass English 7 also receive one credit increment that is added to the applicants' merit rating, improving their chances of being admitted to university.

Each upper secondary course has content which should be covered, and specific grading criteria. The current formal curriculum (Swe: *läroplan*) was implemented in 2011 and the syllabus (Swe: *kursplan*) for English was updated in 2021, which was after the data for this paper was collected. One new addition to the syllabus for English 7 was "texts used in higher education" (Skolverket, 2022b). At the same time, "in-depth articles and scientific texts" was removed, and the word *more* was changed to *certain* in "also of a more scientific nature". The syllabi for the two obligatory courses, English 5 and 6, do not require reading scientific texts or texts used in higher education, instead focusing on texts such as manuals, reports, formal letters and popular science texts. Previous research has showed that some of the content in the syllabus for English in Sweden can be interpreted differently by teachers due to the ambiguous language used (e.g., Eriksson, 2019; Siegel, 2019). Furthermore, the formal curriculum "lacks explicit guidance about timings and priorities when it comes to the use of class time to cover each of the elements" (Siegel, 2019, p. 267), likely resulting in discrepancies between the formal curriculum, the perceived curriculum (i.e, teachers' interpretations of the

curriculum) and the operational curriculum (i.e., the teaching in the localised classroom) (Goodlad, 1979), affecting what individual students learn.

The largest programme in upper secondary school is the social science programme with 63,612 students during the 2021/22 school year (Skolverket, 2022a). Upon completion of the social science programme, students must have the knowledge required for university studies in the broad field of social science, according to the qualitative targets listed in the programme curriculum (Skolverket, n.d.). English is a crucial skill for these students as a majority of the course literature in social science at university is in English (Malmström & Pecorari, 2022), but English is only mentioned in relation to writing and speaking in the programme curriculum.

Course literature in English

Content learning through the use of academic texts in a second or foreign language (L2) may be impacted by the extra workload associated with learning in an L2 because it demands proficiencies students do not necessarily possess (Pecorari et al., 2011, p. 316). Challenging texts in particular may lead students who feel unprepared to give up (e.g., Maguire et al., 2020) or drop out, which may be a larger issue than generally believed (Hellekjær, 2005). In Sweden, an estimated 20 percent of university students drop out of their programmes within the first year. Students with lower grades from upper secondary school are more likely to drop out (Svensson, 2017), but the role of differing levels of language proficiency in contexts where internationalisation of higher education has led to growing numbers of English texts must also be considered. In other words, students who have attended the optional English 7 course may feel better prepared to read course literature in English and, thus, be less likely to give up or drop out.

The increasing use of English in the higher educational domain in Sweden has been documented by many (Gunnarsson, 2001; Gunnarsson & Öhman, 1997; Melander, 2004; Salö, 2010; Salö & Josephson, 2014), leading to a general consensus that English has an exceptional position in higher education and research (Salö, 2010, p. 10). In a recent report, Malmström and Pecorari (2022) confirm that the number of English texts students are expected to learn from in higher education has continued to increase in the past decade. For example, 65% of all undergraduate courses with Swedish as the official language of instruction

at the ten higher educational institutions (HEIs) investigated included at least one text in English, and 24% included only texts in English (Malmström & Pecorari, 2022). Course literature in English is assigned more frequently at universities than university colleges, with Stockholm University identified as one extreme with 65% course literature in English, and Dalarna University College at the lower end with 21% course literature in English (Malmström & Pecorari, 2022, p. 30). The amount of required reading in English likely has an impact on student learning and performance in higher education, yet Nordic students typically receive little to no support from their HEIs who take it for granted that their students have the necessary skills to read course literature in English (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2018).

Around one third of university students in Iceland, Norway, and Sweden struggle to read course literature in English (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2018; Eriksson, 2023b; Hellekjær, 2005). In (Eriksson, 2023b), participants primarily reported issues with vocabulary and reading speed, but also expressed that there is a large gap between the level of English taught in Swedish upper secondary school and the level required at university. Hellekjær (2005) partly blames students' struggles on poor reading proficiency in English, and in particular on issues with vocabulary and a counterproductive tendency to read for detailed understanding. However, Hellekjær (2005) also argues that the teaching of English in upper secondary school in Norway does not reflect what will be required of the students later in life, exacerbating any issues they have transitioning to higher education. Similarly, Arnbjörnsdóttir (2018) argues that there is an incongruence between the increased workload students report in relation to English course literature in Iceland and their confidence in their English proficiency, leading her to question the role of upper secondary school and whether there is a "dissonance between educational and language policies" (p. 158), with upper secondary school curricula that aim for general English language, literature and culture goals rather than academic goals.

Methodology

The data for this mixed methods study were collected from ten upper secondary schools and three universities in Sweden in 2021, using a sequential explanatory design (Creswell et al., 2003) with questionnaires and follow-up interviews. Participating students received no compensation for taking part in the study. Descriptive and inferential statistics are used to analyse and present the quantitative data while the qualitative data was analysed using content analysis

(Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Quotes from participating students have been translated to English.

Student questionnaires

Two questionnaires were designed to target each of the two student populations: university
and upper secondary school students. The questionnaires were carefully constructed in Survey&Report (Version 4.3; Artlogik 2019) to be as similar as possible to be comparable, yet possible for students to answer based on their level of education. Each was pilot tested by more than 50 students at the respective level. To avoid respondent fatigue, the questionnaires were constructed to be completed online in under ten minutes, and predominantly consisted of multiple-choice questions using Likert scales. The questions focused on three themes: ability to read for academic purposes, reading speed, and reading strategies. For inclusion in the study, the selected university programmes all fulfilled a set criterion of a minimum of one textbook or three journal articles in English during the first term of the programme but had Swedish listed as the official language of instruction in the programme syllabus. All participating students were in the social science programme in upper secondary school or a social science programme at university.

To try to reduce self-selection bias, and for example avoid only receiving responses from students who perceive themselves to be good at English, the questionnaires were constructed in Swedish and were introduced and distributed in person by the researcher. In total, 505 students filled in the questionnaires, however, for the purposes of this article only third-year upper secondary school students (n = 132) and first-year university students (n = 206) have been included, resulting in a total of 338 participants. The response frequency differed between the two groups, with 33% of the university students opting to fill in the questionnaire compared to 63% of the upper secondary school students. The participants were predominantly female students (university, 77%; upper secondary school 66%) who had Swedish as an L1 (university, 94%; upper secondary school, 83%). The participating university students had on average higher grades in English 6, with 50% of the university students reporting they had an A or B grade compared to 45% of the upper secondary school students, and a larger percentage had attended English 7 or an earlier version (English C) (university, 65%; upper secondary school, 54%). Like English 7, English C was optional, and a passing grade resulted in a credit increment.

Student interviews

Twelve university students participated in interviews that were conducted in Swedish after the questionnaire data was analysed. The interview participants were selected from a group of students who had opted to fill in their email address when they responded to the questionnaire and were chosen to reflect the demographic data of the questionnaire respondents in regard to gender, age and time spent in higher education. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and largely focused on English 7. Participants gave oral consent to the interviews being recorded and have been anonymised and given a code (IP1-IP12). The interview participants together represent six programmes at the three universities and include seven students who attended English 7, two students who attended English C, and three students who did not attend English in their third year of upper secondary school.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed in NVivo using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), while the quantitative data was analysed and interpreted using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics. The formulated null hypothesis was H_0: No difference between English 6 and 7. Independent samples *t*-test was used to determine if the two groups were significantly different from each other. Cohen's *d* was then used to calculate effect sizes. The reporting of effect sizes in addition to *p* values is important as the *p* value only reports a statistical significance, while the effect size reports a substantive significance (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). The present study uses Sawilowsky's (2009) guidelines for interpreting effect sizes (very small $d = .01$, small $d = .2$, medium $d = .5$, large $d = .8$, very large $d = 1.2$, and huge $d = 2.0$). Prior to statistical analysis, a total of 11 students who reported having English as an L1 and/or who had not attended all of upper secondary school in Sweden were removed, leaving 327 student responses.

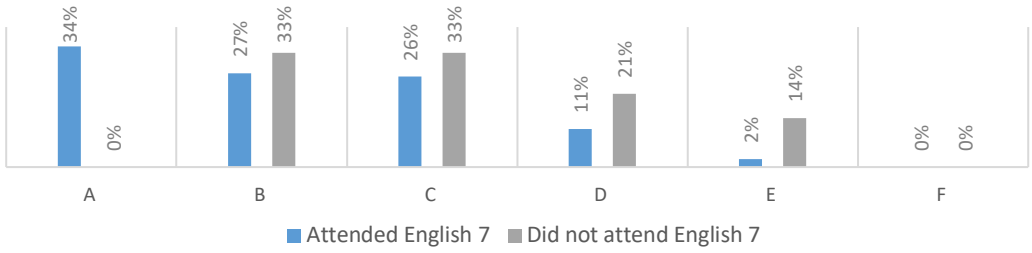
Results and discussion

The results are presented and discussed in relation to the three research questions, focusing first on who attends English 7 and what factors affect students' decisions to do so, secondly on students' self-reported ability to read English for academic purposes, and finally the role of English 7 as a preparatory course for higher education.

Who attends English 7 and factors affecting students' decisions

The first research question asked which students attend English 7 and what factors affect their decision to do so. Questionnaire data shows that university students who have attended English 7 (M = 2.19, SD = 1.096) have significantly higher grades in English 6 than students who did not attend the course (M = 3.16, SD = 1.045), $p < .001$, d = .897[2]. On average, students who completed English 7 had approximately a B grade in English 6 whereas students who did not complete English 7 had approximately a C grade. As seen in Figure 1, 34% of the university students who attended English 7 had the highest possible grade (A) in English 6, compared to 0% of the students who did not complete English 7.

Figure 1. University participants' self-reported grades in English 6[3]



The same pattern can be seen in the upper secondary school data where students who were attending English 7 (M = 2.08, SD = 1.124) when they completed the questionnaire had significantly higher grades than students who were not (M = 3.28, SD = 1.461), $p < .001$, d = .994, with a large effect size for both upper secondary school and university.

Collected evidence suggests students' primary motivation to attend English 7 is the credit increment associated with a passing grade, which improves their chances of being admitted to university. Five out of the nine interviewees who had attended English 7 cited the credit increment along with the ability to get a good grade in English and/or the English courses in school being easy as their motive(s) for choosing English as one of their optional courses in the third year, as exemplified by this quote from IP8:

> IP8 Based on the other two English courses I had taken, it felt Like English is easy and I mostly only did it to get that credit increment because it felt like an easy credit and then I only have to take English which isn't too hard. Now in hindsight I think it was nice with the credit increment but the course itself was a bit like, it might have been worth its credit increment but it wasn't worth its time.

A sixth student said they wanted to attend English 7 for the credit increment but could not do so because it was not offered at their school. The importance of the credit increment is also evident in the interview with a seventh student who explained that she took a test (Swe: *prövning*) after upper secondary school to get a grade in English 7. Participants who did not attend English 7 said they expected the course to be an advanced course that would provide a more in-depth understanding of English and help them prepare for higher education, which is an idea that appears to be in alignment with the syllabus, where content such as scientific texts and texts used in higher education is not included until English 7. Some of the students who attended the course do not appear to agree with this description, however, instead stating there was no difference in difficulty from the previous courses and, as exemplified in the quote by IP8 above, not worth its time.

None of the participating students said they were personally discouraged from attending English 7; however, several students explained how their classmates were discouraged by their teachers or fellow students, as seen in the quotes from IP3 and IP5:

> IP3 Although I was a bit nervous about English 7 because they said if you have an A you might easily get a C in English 7 or go from a C to an E so that's why they wanted those with lower grades in English to not even start English 7 because they risked a failing grade.
>
> IP5 There was some talk about how those who had received an A in English 5, some had received an F in English 7 so you could tell the difference.

In line with IP3, IP12 said their teacher told the class they would not pass English 7 if they did not have an A or B grade in English 6. IP12 further described how their teacher actively tried to discourage students from signing up to English 7 by giving them texts that were more difficult than the texts they later read in English 7 towards the end of English 6 as an example of what type of materials they would be working with in English 7.

Table 1. Participating students' self-reported ability to read for academic purposes in English, reading speed, and reading strategy use

			Attended En7		Not attended En7					
	Scale	*Level*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Difficulty reading English academic texts	1(difficult)–5(easy)	University	3.19	.990	2.47	.969	4.856	195	< .001***	.728
		Upper secondary	3.60	.909	2.98	1.044	3.617	128	< .001***	.639
Frequency of difficulty understanding English academic texts	1(always)–5(never)	University	3.19	.788	2.72	.895	3.758	195	< .001***	.563
		Upper secondary	3.45	.817	3.09	.808	2.535	128	.012*	.448
Frequency of difficulty with new words in English academic texts	1(always)–5(never)	University	2.95	.900	2.16	.822	6.045	195	< .001***	.906
		Upper secondary	2.96	.904	2.60	.863	2.313	128	.022*	.409
Reading speed	1(faster in Swe)–5(faster in Eng)	University	1.79	.704	1.31	.496	5.025	195	< .001***	.753
		Upper secondary	1.97	.986	1.67	.893	1.829	128	.070	.323
Difficulty reading English course literature on time	1(always)–5(never)	University	3.23	1.101	2.66	1.180	3.376	195	< .001***	.506
Familiarity with reading strategies	1(yes), 2(heard of), 3(not sure), 4(no)	University	2.44	.892	2.56	.780	-.913	195	.362	-.137
		Upper secondary	2.12	.763	2.07	.821	.381	128	.704	.067
Reading out loud	1(always)–5(never)	University	3.72	.976	4.03	.962	-2.120	195	.035*	-.318
		Upper secondary	3.63	.993	3.67	1.123	-.196	128	.845	.035
Skimming	1(always)–5(never)	University	3.26	1.077	3.40	1.211	-.838	195	.403	-.126
		Upper secondary	3.22	1.057	3.53	1.104	-1.612	128	.109	-.285
Notes	1(always)–5(never)	University	2.78	1.212	2.72	1.337	.331	195	.741	.050
		Upper secondary	3.59	1.012	3.42	1.017	.937	128	.350	-166
Underlining	1(always)–5(never)	University	3.29	1.400	3.06	1.444	1.112	195	.268	.167
		Upper secondary	3.34	1.096	3.30	1.017	.236	128	.814	.042
Visualising	1(always)–5(never)	University	4.44	.856	4.41	.833	.237	195	.813	.035
		Upper secondary	4.70	.660	4.67	.715	.264	128	.792	.047
Reread if identified lack of comprehension	1(always)–5(never)	University	2.33	.858	2.32	.871	.016	195	.987	.002
		Upper secondary	2.27	.854	2.49	.966	-1.359	128	.177	-.240
Retelling	1(always)–5(never)	University	3.46	.944	3.53	.985	-.502	195	.616	-.075
		Upper secondary	3.52	1.119	3.61	.921	-.510	128	.611	-.090
Cooperative learning	1(always)–5(never)	University	3.37	.928	3.49	1.072	-.771	195	.442	-.116
		Upper secondary	3.26	.850	3.30	.886	-.248	128	.804	-.044
Contextual reading to understand unfamiliar words	1(always)–5(never)	University	2.07	.912	2.32	.781	-1.949	195	.053	-.292
		Upper secondary	2.23	1.007	2.56	1.069	-1.796	128	.075	-.317
Key parts	1(always)–5(never)	University	1.98	.785	1.96	.836	.173	195	.863	.026
		Upper secondary	1.89	.698	2.30	.925	-2.864	128	.005**	-.506
Asking and answering questions	1(always)–5(never)	University	4.16	.891	4.19	.981	-.205	195	.838	-.031
		Upper secondary	3.84	1.000	3.93	.842	-.570	128	.569	-.101
Summarising	1(always)–5(never)	University	3.70	1.136	3.63	1.280	.367	195	.714	.055
		Upper secondary	3.84	.913	3.79	.901	.288	128	.744	.051
Frequency of learning reading strategies in upper secondary school	1(every week)–5(never)	University	4.02	.841	3.68	1.588	1.566	122	.120	.299
		Upper secondary	3.15	1.793	3.23	1.841	-.241	128	.810	-.042

Note. Independent samples *t*-test.

Approximately 63% of students on preparatory programmes and 98% of students on vocational programmes do not complete English 7 (Skolverket, 2022c). There are numerous explanations as to why a majority of students do not complete the optional course. In some cases, students are not given the option to attend English 7 because it is not offered at their school. In other cases, students simply prefer another option. However, the significant differences in English 6 grades between students who chose to attend English 7 and those who did not is concerning for two reasons: 1) it might be a result of teachers and classmates discouraging students from participating, and 2) it likely means students who could benefit the most from attending English 7, especially in terms of preparation for reading course literature at university, do not attend.

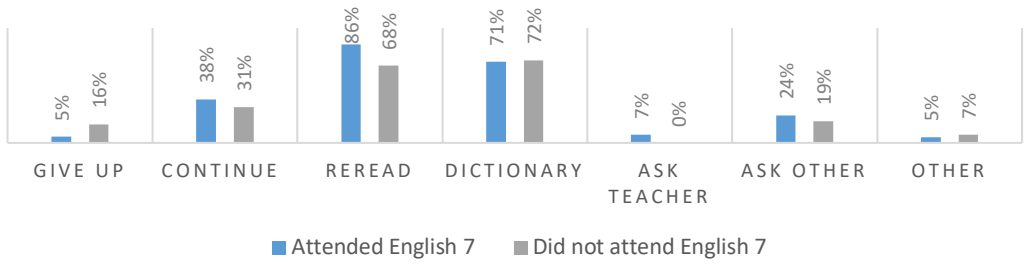
Self-reported abilities to read English for academic purposes

The second research question focused on three themes: students' self-reported a) ability to read for academic purposes in English, b) reading speed, and c) reading strategy use. Students who completed English 7 before university or were currently attending English 7 in upper secondary school when they filled in the questionnaire consistently reported fewer difficulties reading course literature at university or fact-based texts in school than students who had not attended English 7. As seen in Table 1, all of the following variables were statistically significant: reported difficulty reading English academic texts, frequency of difficulty understanding English academic texts, and frequency of difficulty with new vocabulary in English academic texts. In other words, students who did not or were not attending English 6 reported these challenges more frequently than those who opted to attend English 7, a finding which either suggests English 7 helped students overcome these difficulties, that these students already had these abilities prior to entering English 7, or both. A medium to large effect size was found in the university data, and a small to medium effect size in the upper secondary school data. The upper secondary school students consistently reported fewer difficulties than the university students, which may be explained by how the questions were posed; while upper secondary school students were asked about texts they read in upper secondary school, university students were asked about texts they read at university, the latter of which are likely more difficult for students to read and comprehend. These results are in contrast with Hellekjær (2005) who did not find a positive correlation between reading proficiency and completing an advanced English course taught in the second and third year of Norwegian upper secondary school. One possible explanation offered by Hellekjær is that the advanced English course was perhaps not selected

by the academically strongest upper secondary students in Norway. In contrast, the credit increment associated with English 7 appears to result in some of the academically strongest students in Sweden selecting to attend the course.

The participating students in this study were further asked what they do when they do not understand an academic text in English. The upper secondary school students responded similarly regardless of whether they were attending English 7, but the university students who had not attended English 7 reported giving up to a higher degree than university students who had attended the course. For example, 16% of university students who had not attended English 7 reported giving up and not reading any more of the text if they did not understand one sentence or paragraph (M = .16, SD = .371), compared to just 5% of university students who had attended English 7 (M = .05, SD = .227), $p < .013$, d = .377, which is in line with previous research that has showed that students who feel unprepared are more likely to give up (e.g., Maguire et al., 2020). University students who had attended English 7 instead reported continuing to read, rereading or asking for help to a higher degree, as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. University students' self-reported strategies for reading a sentence or paragraph they do not understand in English course literature. *Note. Students could choose more than one option.*

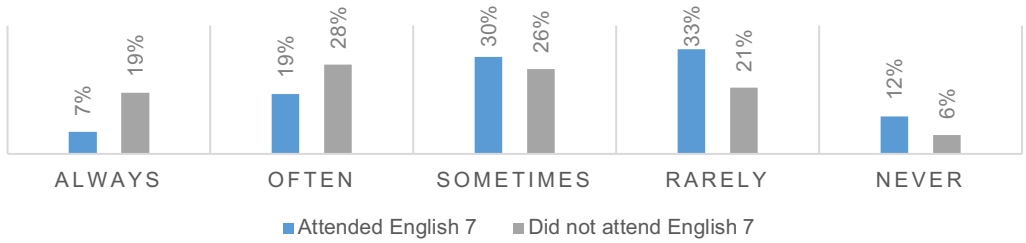


Students who attended English 7 appear to use fewer abandonment strategies, instead opting for more social (e.g., asking for help) and metacognitive (e.g., rereading the text when they recognise an acceptable level of comprehension was not attained) learning strategies, indicating that students who have attended English 7 have a higher degree of learner autonomy (Oxford, 1999).

Regarding reading speed, a statistically significant difference between university students who had attended English 7 and students who had not was found, however both groups reported reading considerably faster in Swedish, as seen in Table 1. The same pattern is found in the upper secondary school data, but the difference between students who were attending English 7 and those were not

was not statistically significant. Slow reading speed can be a sign of processing difficulties (Grabe, 1999) but is not necessarily an issue on its own; however, a statistically significant difference was also found amongst university students' responses to how often they struggled to read their course literature in English on time during the previous term, as seen in Table 1 and visualised in Figure 3

Figure 3. University students' self-reported difficulties reading course literature in English on time



No statistically significant results were found for any of the questions regarding reading strategies, apart from the reading strategy reading out loud (sounding out the words while reading a text to yourself or somebody else) in the university data which students who had attended English 7 reported using more frequently, and the reading strategy key parts (focusing on the important parts of a text) in the upper secondary school data, as seen in Table 1. However, 33% of the upper secondary school students and 52% of the university students reported they do not know what reading strategies are. Furthermore, 19% of the upper secondary school students reported they have never been taught about reading strategies in upper secondary school, and 22% said they cannot remember having been taught about reading strategies. The reading strategies that the participants reported using most frequently were identifying key parts, using the context to understand unfamiliar words, rereading, and taking notes.

Reading strategies are part of the core content in English 5, 6 and 7, and specific reading strategies such as retelling, visualising, asking and answering questions, and summarising are listed in the syllabus (Skolverket, 2022b). Despite being explicitly listed in the syllabus, a majority of the participating students report using these strategies rarely if ever. The lengthy list of core content in the syllabus combined with the lack of explicit guidance regarding timings and priorities in the formal curriculum may lead some teachers to determine that they do not need to address all of the points mentioned (Siegel, 2019), which may provide one explanation as to why many students do not know what reading strategies are and report not having been taught reading strategies in upper secondary school.

The role of English 7 as a preparatory course

The final research question asked if completion of English 7 leads to students feeling more prepared to read course literature in English at university than after completion of English 6, and if so, for what reasons? Participating students rated their reading ability using the CEFR self-assessment grid for reading (Council of Europe, n.a.). Students who had completed English 7 or were currently attending English 7 rated their reading ability significantly higher than students who had not attended English 7 did, as visualised in Figure 4. The effect size was larger for the university sample than the upper secondary school sample, as seen in Table 2.

Figure 4. Self-reported reading ability using the CEFR self-assessment grid for reading

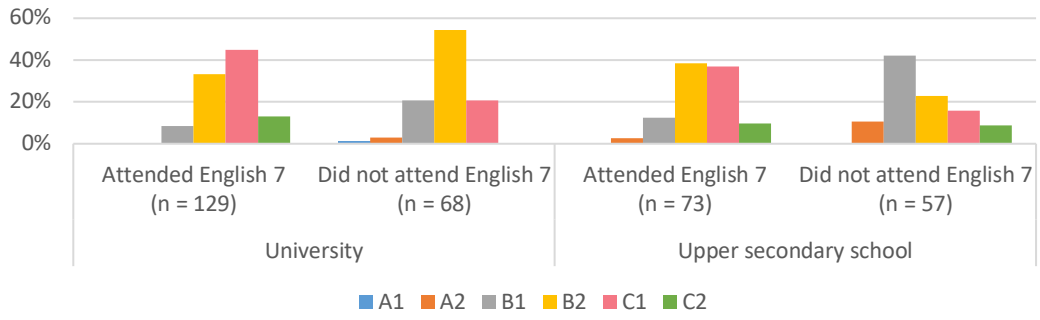


Table 2. Self-reported CEFR levels and preparedness for reading course literature in English

			Attended En7		Not attended En7					
	Scale	*Level*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	Cohen's *d*
CEFR levels	1(A1)–6(C2)	University	4.63	.820	3.90	.813	5.983	195	< .001	.894
		Upper secondary	4.38	.922	3.70	1.133	3.781	128	< .001	.668
Preparedness	1(Prepared)–4(Unprepared)	University	1.84	.737	2.65	.806	-7.096	195	< .001	-1.063
		Upper secondary	1.97	.971	2.51	1.120	-2.919	128	< .001	-.516

University students who completed English 7 also reported feeling more prepared to read course literature in English when they started their respective programmes than students who did not attend English 7. Participating upper secondary school students responded similarly, but the differences and the effect size are smaller, as seen in Table 2.

Although these results cannot explain the extent to which English 7 helped prepare them, it suggests students think English 7 is important in preparing them for reading English course literature. The student belief that English 7 is vital is

further evidenced by student responses related to English 7, where students emphasise that they either signed up to English 7 knowing they would be expected to read a considerable number of texts in English at university and wanted to be prepared, regret not signing up to English 7 because they now think the transition to university would have been easier if they had, or thank their upper secondary school English teacher for preparing them to read academic texts. In essence, there seems to be a perception amongst students that English 7 acts as a bridge between upper secondary school and university, which is exemplified in the following quotes from two of the questionnaire participants who were answering an open-ended question about why they felt prepared to read course literature at university:

> QP1 I took English 7 in upper secondary school and the teacher there was clear about that you often read academic texts in English at university. Even though we got to read academic texts and read more difficult texts such as articles and books I still think it's even more difficult at university when it's subject-related. I recommend taking En7 to not get a massive shock at university, I think it's helped even though it's still difficult.
>
> QP2 The English 7 course was the course that was the most like the teaching I've received at university from all of the courses I took in upper secondary school (…) I felt prepared thanks to the course taking a big step up in the degree of difficulty compared to previous courses in English.

Asked to describe English 7 in interviews, both participants who did and did not attend the course described the course as more academic in nature, although not all participants agreed with this description. For example, IP2 recalled it being declared that the obligatory courses had taught English in general but now there would be an academic focus. In contrast, IP9 described the English in upper secondary school as basic and IP8 said while subjects such as social science and Swedish were preparing the students for further education, the teaching in English was not. Participants further described varying content in English 7. For example, IP4 described a particular focus on speaking. IP3 described mainly reading novels and analysing poetry. IP2 said they had Africa as a theme in English 7 and wrote application letters and a longer essay. IP5 described the teaching as centred around a textbook. These findings are in line with previous research which has suggested that the ambiguous language used in the syllabus may result in the formal curriculum being delivered differently in English classrooms (Siegel, 2019). Sweden is one of the highest ranked countries in the

world in English proficiency (Dafouz & Smit, 2020) and as such one might expect universities to be able to rely on upper secondary schools to prepare students for higher education, but as previously suggested in Norway (Hellekjær, 2008) and Iceland (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2018), the complacency about the quality of the English instruction as preparation for higher education may be unmerited.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The results presented in the present study suggest there may be a need for policy-makers to re-evaluate the role of English 7. Although the interview data is limited, the statistically significant differences in English 6 grades between students who had or had not chosen to attend English 7, combined with the indication that some English teachers attempt to stop lower-achieving students from signing up to the third-year course, suggests students and teachers perceive English 7 as an elite course that is not for everyone – and certainly not for those who need it the most to improve their English. Instead, student responses suggest students primarily perceive English 7 as a course for those who want a credit increment. At the same time, students appear to perceive English 7 as a preparatory course for university. This is not surprising considering content such as "texts used in higher education" (Skolverket, 2022b) is not included in the syllabus until English 7, however, if English 7 continues to function (or be perceived) as a bridge between upper secondary school and university, it should perhaps be a general requirement for admission to higher education considering that nearly half of all course literature in Swedish higher education is in English (Malmström & Pecorari, 2022). Better yet, content which actively prepares students for reading for academic purposes should be introduced earlier and taught from the start of upper secondary school.

Until further investigations have been conducted and policy changes for English in upper secondary school have been enacted, students should be made aware to what extent they will be required to read English texts on Swedish medium instruction programmes early on, to enable them to make informed decisions regarding, for example, whether or not they attend English 7. The responsibility of informing students should lie with all stakeholders involved, including upper secondary school teachers, guidance counsellors, and HEIs, but also the Swedish Council for Higher Education who administer the official website for applying to higher education. Currently, the website lists the official language of instruction for each course and programme. This could be complemented by

information about the language of the course literature. HEIs might also want to consider adopting a strategy for the implementation of course literature in English to aid university teachers. The current lack of systematicity appears to result in students who give up and avoid reading course literature in English, which inevitably impacts their content learning and, in extension, their ability to complete their university courses. By first introducing Swedish textbooks and journal articles to allow students to become acquainted with the subject area before introducing textbooks and finally journal articles in English, students might have fewer issues transitioning from upper secondary school to higher education. For further suggestions on how to assign course literature in English, see (Eriksson, 2023b).

Finally, students' reported unfamiliarity with reading strategies indicates that a professional development course focused on reading strategies for English teachers may be needed. However, the responsibility of preparing students to read texts in English at university cannot be the sole responsibility of the English subject in upper secondary school. By adding a qualitative target related to reading for academic purposes in English to the programme curricula, more teachers might be encouraged to include small amounts of subject-related texts in English in their subjects, broadening students' knowledge of academic English.

Noter

1. In 2021/2022, there were a a total of 111 558 students in the third year of upper secondary school Skolverket. (2022a). *Elever på program läsåret 2021/2022*.
   https://siris.skolverket.se/siris/sitevision_doc.getFile?p_id=551147
   with 39 826 completing English 7 with a passing or failing grade Skolverket. (2022c). *Kursbetyg i engelska läsåret 2021/2022*. https://siris.skolverket.se/siris/sitevision_doc.getFile?p_id=551926
2. For the purposes of this test, students who had attended upper secondary school before Gy 2011 was implemented were excluded from the data.
3. Percentages have been rounded up or down to the nearest number.

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