The Issue of Assessing Reading Literacy –

A Qualitative Study of Strategies Used for Assessment by ESL Teachers at an Upper Secondary School in the South of Sweden and its Consequent Hermeneut

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Abstract
A recent (2016) PISA survey has shown that, among Swedish youth, one in five students do not reach a basic level of reading literacy, a result mirrored that of a similar study from 2009, which suggests that Swedish schools and teachers have failed to address this issue successfully over a longer period of time. This raised the question of why this is and what possible measures could be taken to improve the situation. This study aimed to explore the topic of reading literacy in the ESL classroom. In particular it aimed to specifically research how teachers at a local school in southern Sweden individualise reading activities by assessing existing levels of reading literacy. This was achieved through semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers currently employed at the school who were asked whether or not they assess previous knowledge or skills and, if so, how. When challenged with a negative result, that is, no explicit strategies were discovered, the study took the form of a hermeneutic process in which new questions continuously arose and were explored regarding the subject of reading literacy. The guiding documents for Swedish upper secondary school were studied in order to clarify their approach to reading literacy and the assessment thereof. The conclusion of the study initially discusses the way in which the hermeneutic process has changed and challenged our perception of the topic of assessing reading literacy. Lastly, areas of improvement, and suggestions for future research on the subject, are discussed.
1 Introduction

1.1 Relevance of Researching Reading Literacy

According to a December 2016 press release on The Swedish National Agency for Education homepage (Skolverket, 2016), Sweden had increased its results in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment)-survey for that year within three areas. One of these areas was reading literacy. According to the press release, reading literacy was now back at a level similar to that attained in 2009. This means that Swedish school students are now performing slightly better than the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) average (Skolverket, 2016). When further exploring the topic on the homepage, we found that the Department of School Development have published a short article entitled Why are Swedish students increasingly becoming worse at reading literacy? (Varför blir svenska elever allt sämre på läsförståelse? Authors’ translation) which states that according to the results of the 2009 PISA-study, one in five students in Sweden did not reach a basic level of reading literacy. Hence, it would seem that this is the same level of reading literacy one could also have expected in 2016. According to the article, a “basic level” is the level of reading literacy required to obtain other kinds of knowledge through reading (Skolverket, 2016). Since the ability to read affects a student’s likelihood of succeeding in any kind of learning, the importance of reading literacy and its assessment cannot be stressed enough.

In order to take part in the global community, it is not only important to be literate in one’s native language, but also in English since it is one of the most widely used languages in both social and academic contexts (Lundahl, 2012, pp. 81-83). As future teachers of English as a second language, we feel a strong sense of responsibility towards our students in that we should help them develop their level of reading literacy. In particular, we are interested in students at upper secondary level, which is where most students spend their last years in school before pursuing either work or further studies. Consequently, these are also the final years in which they are required to study English.
According to Interventions for Struggling Adolescent and Adult Readers: Instructional, Learner, and Situational Differences (Calhoon, et al., 2013) the level of reading literacy is globally at such level that it may cause difficulties for individuals in both school and at work. The authors refer to PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) when stating this and further argue that measures must be taken to increase reading literacy; however, in depth studies of how this can be achieved are scarce (Calhoon, et al., 2013). Therefore, in this study, our aim is to focus on discovering ways to improve English reading literacy in upper secondary school.

1.2 Definition of Key Terms

The dictionary definitions of the key terms literacy and the Swedish term läsförståelse are as follows:

*Literacy:* “the ability to read and write” or “knowledge of a particular subject, or a particular type of knowledge” (Cambridge University Press, 2017)

*Läsförståelse:* “(grad av) förståelse av vad man läser” (Svenska Akademien, 2009)

The Swedish definition of “läsförståelse” can be translated to “(level of) understanding of what one reads” (authors’ translation). This definition is the most similar to the former of the two definitions of literacy, namely “the ability to read and write” (Cambridge University Press, 2017). A significant difference is that “literacy” also includes the ability to write which is not the focus of this study; however, this ability has been included when searching for- and reviewing literature as the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. For the sake of clarity, in our writing of this essay we have instead used the term reading literacy in order to be able to use the Swedish and English terms interchangeably and for the reader to know that we are specifically interested in the ability to read.
The definition we have chosen for the key term reading literacy in this study will be taken from the OECD *Education at a Glance* Glossary which states the following:

“Reading literacy is defined in PISA as the ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society.” (OECD, 2007)

This definition concurs well with the description of reading literacy in the guiding documents for Swedish schools (Styrdokument, authors’ translation) (Lundahl, 2012, p. 224) and is appropriate for the purpose of this study. These documents are provided by The Swedish National Agency for Education, which will henceforth be referred to by its shorter, Swedish title: Skolverket.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to increase our knowledge of how English teachers in Sweden assess reading skills in the ESL classroom at a Swedish upper secondary school in the south of Sweden. This was achieved through a qualitative study in which six semi-structure interviews were held with experienced teachers at a large (approximately 1300 enrolled students) upper secondary school in the south of Sweden. The original research question that the study wanted to explore was the following:

1. Which strategies, if any, do teachers of English as a second language at a local Swedish upper secondary school use to assess students’ existing levels of reading literacy?

Unfortunately, the first two interviews revealed that the school studied had implemented an intervention they referred to as Läslyftet. This does not refer to the government-funded project (see section 4.3) with the same name but to a school specific project started in 2014 with the very purpose of improving reading skills and reading literacy among students. Consequently, this had the effect of changing the scope of our study. Therefore, a second question was added:

2. Have these strategies changed since the implementation of the project Läslyftet and if so, how?
However, in the following interviews both of these two research questions remained largely unanswered since the majority of the teachers revealed that they did not use any strategies to assess their students existing levels of reading literacy; in fact it appeared that, in general, they did not assess students’ existing levels of reading literacy whatsoever. It was at this point we realized that the resulting study would eventually become the product of a hermeneutic process (see section 3.1), where existing knowledge is constantly challenged and new knowledge takes its place in an evolving process of understanding. Thus, as well as answering the research questions, we explore the topics of what reading literacy, and the assessment thereof, entails, which is furthermore what the literature review will largely be concerned with. Consequently, the process will be presented as one part of the result, and the results of the interviews make up another part. It is vital for the reader of this study to keep in mind that the study presents an on-going process of understanding, rather than a finalized result.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Reading Literacy and Reading Skills

2.1.1 Reading

Choosing one definition of literacy is difficult, if not impossible. According to Christine Nuttall (1996), Skolverket (2011), Bo Lundahl (2012) and Barbro Westlund (2013) it can refer to a general cognitive ability or to the specific set of skills needed to be able to encode and decode written words. It is, however, not necessarily limited to the written word but can furthermore refer to an understanding of images, film and other media. For the purpose of this study, as stated in the introductory section, we have chosen to include the ability to understand written words in any form when referring to reading literacy which means that throughout the text, being literate is seen as identical to being able to read.

In addition, it is relevant to define what reading is and which reading skills are required to achieve reading literacy. We have chosen to abide by Nuttall’s illustration when describing the process of reading (1996, p.4). The illustration shows that reading is a communicative process in which the sender, who can be both a writer and a speaker, encodes a message. This message bears an idea, a fact or a feeling
which is encoded and shared with a receiver. The receiver, which can take the form a reader or a listener, goes through a mental process, which Nuttall refers to as decoding (1996). Once the decoding is complete, the receiver will have processed the information given by the sender, the message will have been received and the communication will have been established (Nuttall, 1996, p.4). According to Grellet (1990), Nuttall (1996), Lundahl (2012) and Barton (2013), reading may take various forms and serve different functions based on context. These forms, which can be referred to as strategies or reading skills will be presented below. Note that the terms reading strategies and reading skills will be used interchangeably throughout the essay as our literature review revealed that the words are often used to describe the same things.

2.1.2 Reading and Meaning – Predicting, Inferring, Schema, Top-Down and Bottom-Up.

The skills in this category are to do with the way in which readers or learners create meaning from written sources. Predicting is about readers making informed guesses based on, for example, the title of a text and its visual presentation. When a language learner becomes an experienced reader, he or she learns to recognize structures and literary categories that reoccur, such as fairy tales or recipes. This helps them predict what a text will be about based on previous experience. (Barton, 2013, p.91, Nuttall, 1996, p. 118).

Related to predicting what a text is about is the skill of inferring or inference. This is a skill that, according to Nuttall, first language learners do naturally when they encounter words they do not understand, and they evaluate the context in which the words occur and see if it may hint at the meaning of the word. When the learner repeatedly encounters the same words in their correct contexts, he and she can draw conclusions about the meaning of that word (1996, p. 72). Inferencing is not limited to the understanding of words, it also includes understanding what is meant by the author even though it is not clearly stated in the text, that is, reading between the lines (Nuttall, 1996, p.114, Lundahl, 2012, p. 247). Inferring, in short, means trying to understand text or a word based on the context, which requires the reader to access and draw from the knowledge they already have to create meaning.
Predicting and inferring are closely tied to the concept of schema (Nuttall, 1996, pp. 6-7, Lundahl, 2012, p.250), a theory from cognitive science concerning mental structures. These structures take the form of categories of information and the relationships between them and which build a framework for how readers observe the world. That is, how readers’ preconceived ideas influence the way they perceive new information, what they predict the information will be about, and the meaning they infer from what they have read (Nuttall, 1996, p.7, p.119, Lundahl, 2012, p.247). Grellet (1990, pp.56-89) further explains how both of the skills of predicting and inferring can be taught through exercises where predictions are to be made while reading, with the aim of students being able to accurately anticipate what comes next.

When approaching a difficult text, Nutall (1996, p.16) states that strategies such as top-down and bottom-up processing can be adopted to help make sense of it. A top-down process involves the reader using their schemata to draw from his or her personal experience, intelligence, and the predictions he or she can make, in order to comprehend the text (ibid). The vocabulary and syntax is understood and the reader attempts to attain an understanding of the overall purpose of the text or a rough idea of the patterns in the writer’s argument (ibid). Through the reader’s predictions, a framework is constructed with the purpose of providing a sense of perspective of the text’s attempted message and intention. In the bottom-up strategy, the reader looks more at the text’s letters and words and tries to decode them as opposed to trying to understand the general idea. This strategy is commonly used when the reader’s knowledge is too inadequate to decode the message sent from the author. The lack of knowledge can stem from either lack of vocabulary or that the point of view of the reader is “tunnel visioned” (Nuttall, 1996, p.4 p.17). When it occurs, the reader must scrutinize both vocabulary and syntax in order to grasp the message from the author (ibid, p.16). It is important to note that these methods, in practice, are used interchangeably depending on the difficulty of the text or the purpose of reading (ibid, p.17).
2.1.3 Reading for Information – Skimming, Scanning, Reading Closely and Reading Backwards and Forwards.

Firstly, it must be clarified that the fact that we have chosen to discuss reading for information after reading for meaning does not indicate that there is a progression between the two, that is, a reader does not have to master the one before the other. Reading for information skills are specifically used in order to deal with information in written sources in different ways.

To begin with skimming, this skill is explained by Barton as a way of quickly going through a text in order to understand its content without closely reading every word, that is, reading for gist (Barton, 2013, p.91, Harmer, 2007, p.283, Lundahl, 2012, p.260). This style of reading is particularly useful when students are asked to find relevant sources and to do so within a restricted timeframe. As with skim-reading, scanning is also used when students have to go through text quickly. However, the intended use of this strategy is usually when a specific word, phrase or number is sought after (Barton, 2013, p.91, Harmer, 2007, p.283).

Utilizing both skimming and scanning skills can be especially useful for students in upper secondary school since they are usually required to go through various and extensive sources of data daily. It is not clear if these skills are purposefully taught at school or something students may or may not pick up on their own since a focus on specific strategies, aside from word for word reading, are not included in the syllabus until the English 6 and 7 courses, both of which are optional to take part in during upper secondary school (Lundahl, 2012, pp.224-228). One of the styles of reading we believe is encouraged the most in the ESL classroom is “close reading” and top down reading (Lundahl, 2012, p.232). We will return to the subject of reading literacy in the curriculum and syllabuses in section 2.4. Close reading or top down approach involves paying attention to the sentences and ensuring that the student takes their time to understand the meaning of the text. Similar to close reading, reading backwards and forwards is another way of reading to understand or clarify information. Furthermore, it is a skill used by readers when a theory or an idea must be clarified or when sources of proof are sought after (Barton, 2013, p.91).
2.1.4  Reading to Analyse - Questioning, Empathising, Visualising

Lastly, we arrive at skills that are more analytical in nature. In our opinion, it is possible that being able to use these skills is a matter of progression. This is because a text must be at least partly understood in order for the reader to be able to use these three skills in a meaningful way. To begin with questioning, this is a skill explained by Barton (2013) as a way of “clarifying your ideas” (p.91). However, this is not, as we understand it, the only function and effect of this strategy. In order to question, the reader needs to have achieved an understanding and interpretation of the text which is thereafter questioned. Based on personal experience, making students questioning a text was a very common practice encouraged during our own school years and is still used in schools we have taught at recently.

When it comes to the last two skills, empathising and visualising, we find that these skills are not aimed at reading comprehension or interpretation in the same way as the previous skills discussed. Empathising is described by Barton as being able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and to visualise the content. Visualising is explained as a way of picturing something in your mind while reading in order to gain a better impression or understanding of the text (Barton, 2013, p.91). It would seem very difficult to empathize or visualise something you have not understood on a deep enough level. This does not make the skills in this category any less relevant but we wanted to point out that when the reader or learner uses these strategies, their ability to decode is likely to be well developed. We also find that these skills are mostly relevant to the reading of fiction and can thus be linked to Lundahl’s argument for the purpose of reading fiction; to enhance the reading experience by emotionally connecting and relating to the character and his or her context (2012, p.403). These two last approaches are aimed towards understanding the text through sympathy and creative reading (Lundahl, 2012, p.241).
2.2 Reading Literacy and Perspectives on Assessment

A prerequisite for improving reading literacy in English among upper secondary school students is for their motivation to read to be increased. In general, the motivation to learn increases, according to a sociocultural perspective, with the correct use of scaffolding. Scaffolding is explained by Pinter (2011) as an interaction between a learner (novice) and an expert where the expert guides, supports and encourages the learner in performing a task. Hence, in accordance with the aforementioned perspective, learning takes place in a social context. In turn, the idea of scaffolding is based on Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development, ZPD. Pinter (2011) uses this definition of ZPD:

“The ZPD is a metaphorical space between the child’s level of current ability to solve a particular problem and the potential ability, which can be achieved with the careful assistance of someone else, usually a more knowledgeable expert, i.e. a parent or a teacher.” (p.17)

This definition is furthermore supported by Lundahl (2012, p.208), and represents the way in which we will use the term. Lundahl (2012, p.231) refers to Eskey (1988) and states that second language learners often encounter difficulties while reading because of a limited ability to decode. He further finds that the best way to address this issue is for readers to read text just above their current linguistic abilities, which we find is supported by the concept of scaffolding and ZPD.

In conclusion, we suggest that motivation to keep working on improving one’s reading literacy will be increased if the chosen texts and reading activities are within each student’s ZPD, and that the student receives an appropriate amount of scaffolding based on his or her previous knowledge and skills. If the teacher chooses reading activities that are too easy or difficult, he/she may risk affecting the student’s motivation negatively. Lundahl states that a teacher should have high, yet reasonable, expectations of his/her students. In addition, the teacher should have a decent perception of what the zone of proximal development means for each and every student (Lundahl, 2012, p.209). A good way to achieve this “decent perception” is to assess students’ existing knowledge of and skills in reading literacy. Hence, one
of the many ways in which assessment can be used is to help the teacher gain insight into the learners ZPD.

It is important to make a distinction between summative assessment that tests a learner’s performance at a given time, and evaluation which is used for formative assessment with the purposes of progress and change (Ur, 1998, p.244). According to Ur, it is important for the teacher to have a clear intention with his or her tasks due to the different purposes of assessing learner performance and evaluation (ibid). The main purpose of evaluation, in other words, formative assessment, is to form, enhance, and show potential areas of improvement for the learner (ibid). In contrast, the assessment of a learner’s performance, summative assessment, is not aimed towards contributing to the learner’s ongoing process (Ur, 1998, p.245). It is usually used to gather information, check if students have met the course’s criteria and for assessment of grades (Ur, 1998, pp.245-246). Summative assessment is required of us as teachers since part of our profession is to assess our students with the purpose of grading using tests that show the knowledge that each student possesses at a set point in time (Jönsson, 2013, p.19, Ur, 1998, p.244). However, formative assessment is likely to be more positive for students’ motivation. We believe that formative assessment, scaffolding, and the concept of ZPD go hand in hand, since assessing formatively aims to find out what a student’s current skills and knowledge are in order to find ways to guide them in how to keep improving.

Consequently, it is of relevance to investigate how reading literacy specifically may be and is assessed. The following studies discuss literacy and assessment in learners younger than those we will teach in upper secondary school; nevertheless, we find that the two studies are no less relevant since reading skills and the concept of assessment do not change drastically for different age groups. We have, however, kept this in mind when evaluating the sources to make sure that the findings are still applicable to our intended age-group.

In 2012, Shaheena Sulaiman Lalani and Sherwin Rodrigues published **Perception and Practice of Assessing the Reading Skills of Young Learners – A study from Pakistan**. This study aimed to explore the effect of classroom-based assessment on younger students. In the study, one teacher was observed and a
small focus group consisting of four students was interviewed. It was this study that initially inspired the design of our own study and the use of semi-structured interviews as a method of gathering data. The result of their study was that the teacher observed used a variety of assessment practices. However, the practices observed were not based on what was deemed effective according to empirical research, but rather on what the teacher personally believed to be effective. Lalani and Rodriguez concluded their study by presenting recommendations for how teachers may assess their pupils by making them read aloud, asking students to retell a read text, and referencing it in context and discussion (Lalani & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 11).

At a later stage in our study, we were introduced to the work of Barbro Westlund (2013) who in her dissertation, *Att bedöma elevers läsförståelse - En jämförelse mellan svenska och kanadensiska bedömningsdiskurser i grundskolans mellanår*, aims to compare the assessment discourses of reading comprehension in Sweden and Canada. By discourse she refers to the ways teachers speak about their teaching and assessment practices (Westlund, 2013, p. 13). The background to her study is, as we have pointed out earlier, the low results of Swedish students in international comparisons. In order to understand why and how this trend may be changed, Canada was chosen as a point of comparison because of their youth producing significantly better results than Sweden in the 2006 PIRLS. Westlund’s research method consisted of daily interviews with ten teachers over the time-span of one week. One of her most prominent findings was that the Swedish teachers were more focused on assessing in order to provide results in the form of, for example, summative grades, rather than assessing in order to lead students forward in the process of learning (Westlund, 2013, p. 262). We found that learning about how discourse can be examined helped us greatly in analysing our own results. Furthermore, Westlund’s results gave us a point of reference to which we could compare our findings and see if they were similar to the tendencies she had found among the Swedish teachers interviewed in her study.
2.3 Reading Literacy and Education

*Reading Literacy and Education* by Geoff Barton (2013) was the work that initiated and provided the background to the first stage (see 3.1.1) of this study. It was specifically written for a British context; however, Barton’s discussion of literacy is universally applicable and will, thus, form part of the basis for this study. Both Barton (2013, p.83) and Skolverket are of the opinion that literacy is a precondition for acquiring knowledge in general. Consequently, individuals with a high level of proficiency in reading will be at an advantage in school since there is a causality between literacy and success in academic endeavours. Thus, upper secondary school is the last outpost before entering either work life or further studies where we, as teachers, are able to influence our students’ levels of literacy and shape the outcome of those endeavours. It is important here to note that literacy is not only important to those individuals who will pursue further academic study. If we believe that literacy is a precondition for acquiring knowledge in general, it is also important to the overall goal of the curriculum, which is to help students become citizens holding democratic values (Skolverket, 2013, p.4). In a democratic society, every individual must be enabled to pursue knowledge and make informed decisions, regardless of academic background.

Furthermore, Barton claims that an individual’s level of literacy is strongly influenced by the level of literacy of that person’s parents (2013, p.83). This is in accordance with the sociolinguistic perspective as explained by Lundahl, who states that success or failure regarding reading depends on the social and cultural resources of the individual (2012, p.230). This essentially means that, as teachers, we must take into consideration that our students’ levels of literacy are not only the result of the students’ own efforts, or lack thereof, but rather, literacy is a skill strongly linked to sociocultural factors. When assessing literacy, it is important to keep this in mind when considering how to best address any potential issues with reading that are brought to light. The view that reading skills are closely related to social background is also held by Jan Einarsson (2009), who in his book *Språksociologi*, states that the probability of a child continuing into further education after compulsory school is six to seven times higher if the parents also have pursued higher education studies compared to a child whose parents have not. This is a phenomenon he calls
“snedrekrytering” (uneven recruitment, authors’ translation) (Einarsson, 2009, p.336). Again, this complicates our role as teachers since the educational background of our students’ parents is beyond our control. Therefore, we must consider what measures can be taken to reduce the impact of differentiated backgrounds on our students’ potential success in improving their literacy.

2.4 Reading Literacy in the Curriculum & Syllabus

In this section, we want to clarify that we have studied and accounted for the Swedish version of the curriculum and course syllabuses (which include knowledge requirements) for the subject of English, though there are translations of the documents in English. These will, when addressed as a whole, be referred to as the guiding documents for Swedish upper secondary school. The reason for using the Swedish version is that we believe that it is most commonly used by teachers when planning their lessons as well as for communicating the content of the subject of English to students. Hence, the translations in this section are our own. Furthermore, we believed that using the English translations would bring us further from the source material, as the documents were originally written in Swedish.

Reading literacy plays a large part in both the overall curriculum in upper secondary school, and in the syllabus for English courses 5, 6 and 7. According to the curriculum, the role of education is not only to impart knowledge, but also to create conditions that enable the student to acquire knowledge on their own in school, as well as after leaving school (Skolverket, 2011, pp. 6-7). One of the preconditions of developing knowledge independently is learning how to read and comprehend various sources of knowledge; books, articles, literature, online texts and instructions to name a few. In other words, students need to know how to read with the purpose of learning. This concurs with the overall goal of encouraging students to continue to pursue knowledge after leaving school and become lifelong learners (ibid). What this implies for teachers is that they need to teach a wide variety of literature to students in order for them to gather knowledge from as many sources as possible when it is time for them to do so independently. Thus far, the importance of reading literacy is well established in the curriculum.
In the syllabus, we find that the guidelines for what should be read are broad and inclusive, gradually including more types of sources as the levels of the courses progress. In the English syllabus, English 5 includes the reading of fiction and other sources, such as manuals, popular science, and reports. In English 6, modern and older literature is added, including poetry, drama and music as well as formal letters and reviews in the category of “other sources”. Lastly, English 7 requires the reading of all of the above-mentioned texts as well as more genres and formal sources, such as contracts and academic articles. (Skolverket, 2011, pp. 3-9)

English 5 is the only course that is mandatory for students at upper secondary school regardless of study programme, and one must assume that if a student meets the requirements for the course, with a grade E (i.e. pass), he or she will have achieved a level of reading literacy in English required by the curriculum. Therefore, this is the course that will receive the main focus and attention in this study. The grade rating scale in Sweden is divided into six steps: A, B, C, D, E and F with A-E representing a passing grade. F represents a non-passing grade. It is up to the teacher to, with the help of the knowledge requirements for the course, grade students at the end of term. If there is no foundation on which to base the student’s grade, due to absence from class, the grade will be marked with a line (⋅) (Skolverket, 2017).

The knowledge requirements in the syllabus for English 5 state that strategies for reading texts with different purposes should be taught as well as strategies for finding and critically evaluating sources in the form of written texts (Skolverket, 2011, pp. 55-56). It is, however, not very clear what these strategies are exactly until the courses become more advanced when students, for example, are required to pick up on nuances in style and understand inferred meaning (ibid pp. 60-61). Our overall opinion is that the syllabus is written in such a way that, if followed closely, it should enable the teacher to achieve the goals stated by the curriculum. However, it is also written in a way which makes selecting appropriate texts, developing tasks, classroom activities, and practical ideas that follow these guidelines up to the teacher, in addition to finding their own way of assessing the learners.
When it comes to assessment, we find that the guidelines are more general than specific in the knowledge requirements for English 5 (Skolverket, 2011, pp. 3-4). One requirement for grade E that directly concerns reading literacy stipulates that:

“Eleven kan förstå huvudsakligt innehåll och uppfatta tydliga detaljer i (...) i tydligt formulerad skriven engelska, i olika genrer. Eleven visar sin förståelse genom att översiktligt redogöra för, diskutera och kommentera innehåll och detaljer samt genom att med godtagbart resultat agera utifrån budskap och instruktioner i innehållet.” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 3).

“The student understands the main part of the content in, as well as the distinct details of, (...) clearly formulated written English of different genres. The student shows his or her understanding by, in a general manner, accounting for, discussing, and commenting on the content and details, as well as, with an acceptable result, act upon the contents message or instructions.” (Authors’ translation).

This means that for a minimum level of literacy a student must be able to, in a general manner, describe, discuss, comment, follow instructions and comprehend messages from written text and, with an acceptable result, act upon messages or instructions in the material (ibid). For grade C the term “general” manner changes to “informed” and for grade A to “informed and nuanced” (Skolverket, 2011, pp. 3-5). The abilities of discussing, describing, commenting, comprehending and following instructions are not discussed in any more detail. Hence, it is not clear what specific skills need to be mastered in order to develop these abilities; therefore, it is up to the teacher to decide on what skills the students should be assessed.

Furthermore, of the knowledge requirements stated in the syllabus for English 5, reading is placed under the term “receptive” skill and states the following: “The student can use, with some certainty, strategies for acquiring and critically reviewing the content in both spoken and written English” (Skolverket, 2011, p.4). This, however, can be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it is not specified what these “strategies” are apart from the ones described in the knowledge requirements above, which do not include any of the skills mentioned in section 2.1.1-2.1.4, such as skimming, scanning, inferring or predicting. Secondly, no actual strategies for assessment are presented in the English 5 syllabus. This makes it difficult to follow
the guidelines presented in the curriculum where it is stated that teachers are to communicate to the student on what grounds their grades are based (Skolverket, 2011, p. 15). It is furthermore difficult for the teacher to assess previous knowledge unless he or she develops their own method of doing so since this is not addressed at all in either curriculum or syllabus. It is worth pointing out that certain goals for reading are stated in the syllabus for the later courses in English, although they are not mandatory for graduating from upper secondary school.

2.5 Reading Literacy and Läsförståelse

We aimed to study the Swedish curriculum and the syllabus for English closely in order to better grasp the term ‘läsförståelse’ which is a word commonly used to describe skills and knowledge related to reading. As stated earlier, we wanted to be able to use this word interchangeably with our definition of reading literacy. This was important since we had decided to use Swedish when conducting our interviews and that the word we would use in Swedish for reading literacy would be ‘läsförståelse’. Translating läsförståelse directly was not effective since it results in “reading comprehension” which in itself is an ambiguous term and does not completely capture what is meant by ‘läsförståelse’.

We discovered that the word ‘läsförståelse’ is not actually used in the overall curriculum or syllabus for the courses English 5, 6 or 7 or knowledge requirements for these courses, which came as a surprise to us since it is a word we have encountered regularly while out on teaching practice. This had evidently given us a false sense that ‘läsförståelse’ is a term with a specific and concise meaning. Instead, reading, in the curriculum, is included under the heading “Reception” (same as English), where several definitions of what the students should be able to read are given. What is important to note here is that the syllabus also includes a goal that the students should be able to use “strategies” to understand written text, which implies that they should have a meta-cognitive awareness of the processes behind reading.

Thus, the definition of reading literacy includes both the ability to read written words as well as the ability to reflect upon the process of doing so. We find that the strategies are not elaborated upon but we choose to interpret the requirement as including a range of reading skills needed to achieve ‘läsförståelse’ or reading
literacy. Consequently, we found that we needed to specify what reading skills we should aim to focus on in this study, which was done in section 2.1.

With regards to choice of literature in upper secondary school, Lundahl (2012) differentiates between continuous texts, such as stories and instructions, and non-continuous texts such as surveys and maps. Furthermore, he suggests that the increased interest in Swedish school students’ results in international comparisons, have had the effect of the current curriculum explicitly asking for students to acquire skills in processing many types of text, both continuous and non-continuous. The demand for inclusion of both types of texts highlighted above exemplifies the width of the term ‘läsförståelse’ or reading literacy when it comes to the types of text that are expected to be understood by students. The term allows for immense personal interpretation which influences the range of what knowledge and skills may be expected from students. In addition, the broader term makes it more difficult when trying to develop relevant research and interview questions.
3 Methodology

3.1 Hermeneutic Process

As stated earlier, this study is not the product of a straightforward linear process starting with one question leading to one answer. Rather, it has continuously developed and changed direction based on our findings, leading to new questions and new answers which, as the reader has and will find, has impacted on the methodology. The theoretical background that this process can be said to serve as an example of can be found within the field of hermeneutics. The term originates from theology where it refers to the interpretation of theological texts (Bryman, 2009, p. 25; Eriksson Barajas, et al., 2013, p. 48). However, according to Eriksson, Barajas et al. (ibid) hermeneutics has grown strong as a perspective within didactic research as a reaction to the positivist tradition which is traditionally associated with a quantitative approach (ibid, p. 55). For this reason it is relevant to use the hermeneutic process as a model for our study which is explicitly qualitative in its approach. Bryman, too, states that it is an analytical strategy that has great potential, not only for analysing text, but also for analysing social actions (such as teaching, authors’ note) and other phenomena that do not take the form of writing. (2009, p. 370.).

According to Bryman, it is central to the hermeneutic method that the understanding of the context in which something occurs is essential for the overall understanding. The emphasis on context is further exemplified by Eriksson, Barajas et al. as trying to answer the questions What, Where, How and Why an occurrence has taken place (2013, p.150.). With reference to our study, this means that we continuously account for the changing circumstances that have affected our results and the interpretation of our findings. Furthermore, hermeneutics make use of the author’s existing knowledge and presuppositions, and the method demands that the author(s) account for these which can be done through the literature review (ibid, p.140, 150). We have, thus, used the literature review to account for our existing knowledge about reading literacy as well as relevant and related topics such as assessment and education in order for the reader to understand the basis of our analysis, discussion and conclusion. This is also the reason for why we recurrently refer to our own thoughts and experiences and why the process is described in such detail.
Consequently, the description of our results will begin with an explanation of the process divided into stages one, two, three, and four. The First Stage began in an earlier module with the writing of an essay about ways to assess reading literacy in a systematic way. The Second Stage describes the process of the current study up to the point where the two first interviews had been conducted. At this point, another research question was added regarding Läslyftet, a recent and site specific intervention introduced in the studied school that aims to improve reading literacy. We were not aware of this when beginning the study. As a result, a Third Stage was implemented; the last part of the process and the part where we move from the previous process to the current study, which comprises the Fourth stage; the results from the interviews.

Thereafter, the discussion will discuss our results as a whole but with the interviews making up the core of the discussion. Lastly, our conclusion will summarize our findings. Here the reader will be provided with a description of the insight we have gained through the process of this study, as well as comments on potential future ways in which reading literacy, and the assessment and teaching thereof, can be further researched. In this way, by describing our previous knowledge and presumptions, accounting for the process of our study and looking into future ways of dealing with our topic, we have followed the hermeneutic process as far as the scope of this study allows. At the same time, we invite and enable the reader to continue the process from the point where we leave the subject.
3.2 Interviews

The first decision that was to be made regarding the methodology of this study was whether a quantitative or qualitative approach should be taken. With the first research question in mind, either method was plausible but it was decided a qualitative approach would be more effective. The reason for this is that the data we wanted to acquire was not a quantifiable list of methods used by teachers but rather in depth information and detail about the methods themselves. This makes a qualitative study more appropriate since it places an emphasis on words rather than quantifiable data (Bryman, 2009, p.249). Furthermore, a quantifiable result would be difficult to interpret and discuss unless each teacher was asked to elaborate on what they meant by “strategies”, how they are enacted and documented in a classroom environment and in what way this information is used. We felt that a method that allowed more in depth answers was needed and, thus, a qualitative approach was taken.

The next decision to be made was whether observation or interviews would be the more effective method of gathering data. If we had chosen to use observation as a method, we would have been able to gather empirical data directly from the classroom environment. However, due to our limited time (10 weeks) and the impracticality of following seven different teachers at once, we chose to use interviews instead. The interview would allow the interviewer, in a shorter time span, to gather data concerning the teacher’s strategies of assessing students’ levels of reading literacy as well as the way in which these are enacted by the teacher. According to Bryman, an interview is common practice within the field of qualitative studies if the goal is to investigate an individual’s attitudes, values and opinions (Bryman, 2009, pp.122-123).

Bryman discusses a variety of forms an interview may take. The different variations that we chose from were structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Semi-structured, as the name implies, is a combination of both a structured and an unstructured form in the sense that it follows a theme based structure. In our case, the theme revolved around questions concerned with reading literacy (Appendix 8.1). However, the questions are open and their purpose is to lead the respondent into the
said theme, allowing him/her to freely interpret and discuss it from their own personal point of view (Bryman, 2009, pp.301-304). Since the purpose of this study was to gather qualitative data on teachers’ strategies on assessing reading literacy, the interviewer needed to be able to adapt to the responses. Thus, the semi-structured interview structure guidelines presented by Bryman were used.

Bryman proposes the use of introductory questions which serve the purpose of initiating the interview and easing the atmosphere by letting the respondent talk briefly about themselves. In order for an individual to discuss their opinion, attitudes and values, he or she must feel comfortable and not confronted by the interviewer (ibid, pp.305-306). Secondly, follow-up questions are used when the interviewer wants to center on a theme and also when the respondent gives a response which is beneficial for the study and a more in depth answer is asked for (ibid, p.306). Explorative questions are used as an alternative to follow-up questions with the difference that they are used to explore the theme that the respondent is discussing. Based on the respondent’s answer, this may lead to more precise questions. This form of question is used to pinpoint certain aspects of information that may or may not be important to the conducted study. (Bryman, 2009, p.306) In a semi-structured interview it is difficult to write these questions in advance.

The questions below (see also appendix 8.1 for the Swedish version) fall under the introductory, follow-up, and explorative category, and based on the respondent’s answer we followed them up with further explorative and/or precise questions. Questions 1-6b were created in order for us to reach questions 6 a and b quickly so that these two questions, that deal with assessing reading literacy and previous knowledge and skills, could be discussed in detail.

| 1. What courses (of English) do you teach? | A. Questions one to six fall under the introductory category. |
| 2. Is English your main subject? | |
3. How long have you been teaching for?

4. To what extent does your teaching include reading, writing, and speaking, respectively, if you were to calculate the different parts into percentages?

5. Focusing on reading, what kind of activities does that involve?

6a. How do you determine the levels of knowledge before you choose an activity?

6b. – and if so, in what way?

7. How did you arrive at using these methods?

8. How did your methods influence your teaching?

9. In what way does reciprocal teaching work in your classroom?

B. Question six a and b made up the main focus of the interview and were complemented with follow-up or explorative questions adapted to the answers of the interviewee. If this was not possible, question 7 was used as an alternative follow-up and explorative question.

C. Questions eight and nine were added after we learned about the initiative Läslyftet and repeat the structure described in B.

Figure 1. Interview questions with descriptions

With the semi-structured interview as our means of gathering data, we also opted to use an inductive approach in order to attain the purpose of this study. The inductive approach is when data is gathered through semi- or unstructured interviews or observation where the researcher is neutral or participating. From the findings in the interviews, a theory is generated and the theory makes up the result (Bryman, 2009, pp.22-23).
3.3 Research Participants

The participants of this study were teachers from an upper secondary school in southern Sweden. The teachers will be anonymous in this study and will be referred to as teacher A, B, C, D, E and F. The teachers who were interviewed were chosen based on a convenience- and coincidence selection (Bryman, 2009, pp.312-313). This was due to the difficulty of reaching teachers prior to the national test period which begins in late April and when most of the teachers at this particular school were busy preparing for the tests as well as the Easter break that took place during the period of writing. The information regarding the interviews was purposefully slim and simply stated that we were conducting a study on reading literacy since we did not want to influence the interviewees answers (Appendix 8.2). Because our study changed direction after the interviews were conducted and analysed, we took the opportunity to speak, informally, to a few students about their feelings about reading once Läslyftet was implemented. These students were informed that we might discuss their answers in our study but that their answers would be treated anonymously. We also made sure that the students were over 18 to ensure that we did not need to ask for their parents’ consent for their participation in the study.

3.4 Possibilities and Limitations

We find that, when writing our research questions, we did not adequately address the possibility of receiving the answer “no” to our first question which, in short, was whether or not teachers assess previous levels of reading literacy. This mistake turned out to be both a limitation and a possibility. As we realized that the interviewees rarely mentioned explicit and concise ways of assessing reading literacy, we had to delve into the complex question of “why” which, as it turns out, was interesting and complex enough to make up our whole study and led us into the hermeneutic process. Trying to understand “why” lead us to view teaching practices as well as the curriculum and syllabus with a critical eye which revealed flaws that we had previously not thought of. It was this factor that turned the mistake into a possibility since, as teachers to be, it is highly valuable to address this problem in order to do better as we start teaching English ourselves. One of the goals of
teaching is to do so with methods backed up by research and this study became a great opportunity to learn more about assessing reading literacy.

However, the study is limited in its scope. Although the majority of the English teachers at the studied school were interviewed, it was still only one school, which makes the results nearly impossible to generalize. In addition, the school cannot be held to be representative of the average upper secondary school since they had developed and implemented the intervention they referred to as Läslyftet in order to better the reading literacy of their students. This means that generalization cannot be strived for in this particular study since the school is, in fact, unique. Rather than aiming for generalization we went the other direction and studied our topic in an even more qualitative manner than we initially intended. It is valuable to use the studied school as a point of comparison to other schools that have either not addressed reading literacy in any specific way or schools that have instead made use of the government funded programme with the same name; Läslyftet.

Another limitation that we had not predicted was that, in our effort to not influence our interviewees, we did not inform them of the purpose of the study which lead them to speculate and think that we aimed to evaluate the school specific Läslyftet intervention. This certainly affected the results and may provide an explanation to why we did not receive the answers we expected regarding assessment. Simply put, our aim was to evaluate methods of assessment but the interviewees thought we wanted information about Läslyftet. We quickly adjusted our research and interview questions since Läslyftet was important to the study but this made any information about assessment even more obscure. Possibly, it would be greatly beneficial to add observations to the method of this study and monitor what actually takes place in the classroom regarding assessment of existing levels of reading literacy over a longer period of time. Here, the time limitation of the study becomes evident.
3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The empirical data gathered from the interviews went through a process known as post-coding (Bryman, 2011, pp. 158-160). The process of coding involves revisiting findings several times and discovering various themes to study within the empirical data (ibid, p.158). The process is, moreover, similar to content analysis. The data to be sought after can either be chosen beforehand or after the interviews have been conducted. In our case, due to the nature of this study and its development, we chose to do our coding after the interviews were done, hence “post-coding”. According to Bryman, results from interviews with open questions have to be coded in order to find themes and to be able to sort out the relevant data.

By using coding, it is important to point out that there is a risk of data being misinterpreted or jeopardizing the validity of the result presented in this study (Bryman 2011, pp.158-159). Examples of problems that may arise are given by Bryman and include altered, skewed and biased interpretation of empirical data, which is an obstacle an author must address when using post-coding, since it is the author’s interpretation that is presented in their study (Bryman, 2011, p.158). The way we have addressed this, as explained in section 3.1 “The Hermeneutic Process”, is by openly accounting for what our own interpretations are, and the background-knowledge they are based upon.

The semi-structured interviews we conducted generated both relevant and irrelevant data and answers, where, in order to find relevant data for this study, we chose three themes for our coding; the first being strategies for assessment which was the main focus of our study. The second was how the interviewees interpreted the subject of reading literacy. This would help us connect the answers the teachers gave us to our definition of reading literacy. The final code, which was added after the first two interviews, was Läslyftet. It is important to point out that we were not aware of Läslyftet prior to the first two interviews, after which we added our second research question, and the teachers were not aware of us being uninformed. During an informal conversation in-between interviews, we were made aware that the interviewees thought that our aim with the study was to evaluate the effects of the school specific Läslyftet. Thus, we decided not to treat the first two interviews any
differently from the rest since the interviewed teachers had already responded to our questions as if we were evaluating Läslyftet.

3.6 Ethical Principles

We have chosen to follow the ethical guidelines presented by the Swedish Research Council. From this collection of guidelines we followed the four main conditions for ethical research which we have translated and are; the principles of information, consent, confidentiality, and usage (Vetenskapliga rådet, 1990, pp. 7-14). In the e-mail we sent to the teachers we stated that their participation is voluntary and they may withdraw their participation at any point (Appendix 8.2). The information we gave regarding the study was that it revolved around reading literacy and the way in which teachers assess it. It was possible for us follow the rules concerning anonymity of the participants in accordance to the principle of confidentiality due to our study having no interest in revealing which individual teacher said what. (Vetenskapliga rådet, 1990, p. 12). The participants were informed that the study will neither publish the interviews, nor under any circumstances share the full conversation that was held between the interviewer and respondent. (Vetenskapliga rådet, 1990, p. 14)
4 Results and Analysis

4.1 First Stage – The Barton Test

For the first stage, we decided that we wanted to study reading literacy based on what we have stated in the introductory section of this essay about the relevance of researching reading literacy. It is a field within education that is currently receiving much attention and, we feel, rightfully so. Apart from reading literacy being a large part of what we will teach in the near future making it relevant for us as teachers, we feel that reading literacy is important on more levels than merely in the classroom. As our literature review will show, reading literacy is important to each individual, to society as a whole as well as in life beyond the classroom. Consequently, we started thinking about how we could improve our students’ reading literacy skills in English.

A problem that often came to light when discussing how to teach reading was how to make students read at all. Here, as many factors come into play, we specifically decided to examine the concept of motivation in more depth. While training to be teachers we had learned about the importance of scaffolding and employing the zone of proximal development in order to generate motivation (see section 2.2).

Thus, we asked ourselves how we could provide the guidance and encouragement that scaffolding requires for each student when choosing materials and reading activities. Often, one class reads one specific text and at the same time. This is not optimal for motivation when considering that proper scaffolding requires the teacher to have a good understanding of each students’ ZPD and adapt accordingly. We found there was a need for individualisation and wanted to investigate how individualising reading could be carried out in a systematic and effective way. The words systematic and effective are keys since we, from experience, have learned that teachers often cite large classes and lack of time as reasons for not individualising to a greater extent. The first step to employ scaffolding and increase motivation is becoming familiar with each individual student and to find out about their previous knowledge and reading related skills.

With this as our starting point, we read ‘RQ¶W&DOOLW/LWHUDF\! by Geoff Barton, which is examined in more detail in the Literature Review section. Based on his work, we
tested a group of students on their abilities to identify a set of mystery texts. They were asked to read three unseen, short texts from different genres and answer questions about the types of texts they were, where they could typically be found, and how they (the students) were able to identify the texts. (See appendix 8.3). The purpose was to see if this was a successful method for assessing the students’ level of reading literacy, as well as to see what specific reading skills they employed in solving the task. Unfortunately, the results proved to be ambiguous. It was an effective method in that it clearly showed which text was more difficult for the students to identify. One of the texts stood out as being more difficult than the others and here, the results were conclusive; they showed that a text from a tabloid was the most difficult, possibly because it was hard to discern the outtake from a fictional story they might encounter in other types of fiction. The test also showed, to some extent, what the students struggled with or were helped by, such as the vocabulary. It did, however, not show as clearly as we had hoped what specific reading skills were used, and which skills were lacking when difficulties arose. This is the point where the idea for this study started to form (see appendix 8.1).

What we asked ourselves after having finished this stage was if we were not trying to reinvent the proverbial wheel. In our experience, becoming familiar with students’ levels of previous knowledge and skills through various types of assessment is a large part of what teachers do daily. Through this short test, we now had a deeper understanding of why assessing reading literacy in particular can be challenging. Also, we believed that more experienced teachers are likely to have encountered the same difficulties and, as a consequence, tried to solve them. This was knowledge that we wanted to take part of. Therefore, we decided to simply ask teachers what methods they use when assessing learners’ existing reading skills and to discuss the implications of these methods.
4.2 Second Stage – Unexpected Results

During the first two interviews with teacher A and B, the definition of reading literacy, our perception of the subject, and expectations were based on our findings described in stage one. That is, reading literacy was a problem among Swedish youth, that research on the topic was scarce, and not enough was being done in Swedish schools to address the problem. However, this was unexpectedly proven wrong to us since the studied school had introduced an intervention called Läslyftet, which meant that we were unable to compare this school to the findings from PISA, OECD and Barton.

Furthermore, the introduction of Läslyftet meant that we had not studied the subject, nor had any questions prepared to include this in our interviews in a professional way. Even though we used semi-structured interviews, we quickly realized the problem of not being up to speed on the subject, which is one of the core requirements needed for this style of interview (Bryman, 2009, pp. 300-301). This discovery did not change the aim of the study, instead it simply allowed us to explore new areas and modify the current questions.

Thus, the first two interviews with teacher A and B were done without Läslyftet in mind, as, at this point in time, we were unaware of the intervention. However, in hindsight we realized there was a risk that teachers, based on the email we sent them (see appendix 8.2), thought that the study would be directly aimed towards investigating Läslyftet and how it affected their way of teaching reading literacy and the risk of misunderstanding must be considered.

4.3 Third Stage – Läslyftet

After the changes were made to our semi-structured interviews and a second research question was added, we continued to interview the remaining teachers. From our first two interviews, we understood that this school in particular stood out from the average in terms of teaching reading literacy. A large part of what occurred between stages two and three was made up of us researching Läslyftet in order to learn as much as we could about it and how it was relevant to our study.
When first encountering the term Läslyftet we immediately thought of the government funded, official, programme with that name. This led us to first explore that topic in preparation for the last round of interviews. We found that the programme consists of taught modules aimed towards the further training of employed teachers. It deals specifically with different topics related to teaching reading and writing literacy from pre-school to upper secondary school level. To access detailed descriptions of the content of the modules, a login was required which meant we were unable to access this information. However, on Skolverket’s homepage (Skolverket, 2017) there are short descriptions of the modules taught in the autumn term of 2017, which, for upper secondary school, include information on how to teach analytical and critical assessment of text, academic reading and writing, reading comprehension, and reading strategies. Unfortunately, we could not deduce, based on the limited information, what theoretical background these courses explored or whether it was research-based; though we must assume this to be the case considering it is required of teachers to base their practice on research based methods (Skolverket, 2011, p.11).

However, this time around, when asking specifically about Läslyftet, we learned from teacher C that it was not in the above-mentioned programme that the teachers at the studied school had been involved. Instead, it was an intervention independently developed by the school in 2014. Furthermore, the research that had inspired the ideas behind the project was not necessarily the same as that which provided the background for the government funded programme. Instead, the school’s version of Läslyftet was inspired by a dissertation by Barbro Westlund (2013) that we had not yet encountered while researching our study. Further details about what Läslyftet entailed at the studied school are provided in section 4.4.2. Again, we had to go back to see if we needed to make additional changes to our study. Fortunately, Westlund’s work and findings were very useful to us and did not conflict with our purpose. Rather, it provided us with new insights that were very valuable, and which caused us to include her work in our literature review even though it was late in the process of writing. After having implemented this, we found that we could finally go on to analyse the results of the interviews.
4.4 Fourth stage - Interviews

4.4.1 Reading Alongside

Teacher A, C, D, E and F were teaching English 5, where teacher B was the only one currently not teaching the course, but had several years of experience. During all of the interviews, it was verified that all of the teachers interviewed spent more time on reading and reading activities than any other language skill. However, when asked if they evaluated students existing knowledge and skills before choosing reading activities, the answer was “no”. A few years prior to the changes that the school made to address this issue, teacher A, B and D defined the reading activities as consisting mainly of Reading alongside (bredvidläsning, authors’ translation). This activity was further explained as uninstructed extensive reading that took place alongside other classroom activities. For example, the students were asked to read when the teacher ran out of activities on their lesson plan, when the students were finished with other tasks, or at home for homework. This made reading a passive and secondary activity with regards to language learning.

Furthermore, the interviews showed that reading alongside was primarily used by older teachers who were “set in their ways”, as stated by teacher C, and did not wish to change their style of teaching, nor create new material. It was further explained that, previously, the methods of teaching reading had been individually decided and varied from teacher to teacher who based their choices on a so called “gut feeling”, as mentioned by teacher C and D, rather than from a scientific viewpoint. This “gut feeling”, which was defined as a method based on a hunch and its individual nature proved problematic when the school tried to pinpoint errors (authors’ translation from “fel”) in teachers’ teaching styles, according to teacher C and D.

Teacher C was put in charge of creating the concept of Läslyftet to make reading a more actively trained skill and to create a solid foundation for teaching reading skills based on research. This was partly due to complaints from higher education institutions concerning newly graduated school students’ level of reading literacy and partly because of the low rankings in the PISA results. Teacher C explained that, with the help of teachers, students need an introduction to and support for new reading strategies in order to be able to learn and understand how to use them in an efficient
way. The teachers did not mention scaffolding or ZPD but our interpretation is that this approach concurs with the sociocultural perspective that states that individuals learn better by interacting with each other. This transition from reading alongside individually to actively practicing reading skills together was initiated during the autumn of 2014.

### 4.4.2 Läslyftet

The school specific *Läslyftet* intervention (which is not to be confused with the investment that the government has made in a project of the same name) was created in 2014 in an effort to create better conditions and strategies for improving students’ reading literacy. One of the greatest changes was that the teaching hours for the English 5 and 6 courses were increased from 80 to 100, out of which the 20 added hours were to be dedicated towards reading. The idea behind the added hours was that the amount of time was not enough to teach the various skills in English without things being done in a hurry. When asked about Läslyftet, teacher C stated: “This is just the beginning of our journey, we are discovering new things and we are developing a common language, it is less stressful for both students and teachers and has added research to support our teaching. Teacher C furthermore added that the project is still under development.

Läslyftet introduced the school to reciprocal teaching, inspired by the work of Barbro Westlund. As explained by teacher B: “It is when you help students to predict, question, clarify and summarize. That is how we do it; students ask questions and find the answer in the text, on the lines, between the lines and beyond the lines” Reciprocal teaching, as we understand it, involves asking students questions prior to reading in order to check their knowledge and understanding of the content of what they were about to read, during, and after reading. The method also includes formative assessment where students and sometimes the whole class participates in discussions regarding about the text where they are required to continuously explain what they have read and understood. Furthermore, all teachers at this particular school were to make sure that, after the students have read, they were to be engaged in activities during which the teacher could continuously assess the students. These activities were as follows:
4.4.3 Discussion

This strategy revolved around students being in charge of the discussion activity after reading a novel. This meant that students were to lead the discussions in the classroom completely on their own or possibly with a helping note with topics to discuss. As explained by teacher A, this strategy of assessment forces the student to revisit the texts in order to keep a fluent and well informed discussion going. This method was present among teachers A, B, C, and D. It was mentioned that the preferred material for this activity, from the perspective of teacher and students, were books not written for educational purposes.

Moreover, the goal was to encourage students to find a personal interest in the material through discussions based on what they found intriguing. This could be done through topics that were handed to the students which the teacher had written prior to the lesson of which the students could then explore according to their own interests. These topics were purposefully written in an ambiguous way in order to avoid closed questions that would only generate short uninteresting responses. Teacher A explains: “The discussion itself can take more than one lesson to complete, however, I feel that it is worth the time when considering the experience and understanding that students get from it.” From an assessment point of view, the discussions that arose became the foundation of assessment.

However, the strategy was, according to teachers A, C, D and E, not without flaws. In some cases students were allowed to choose their own material to read and, in some of those cases, the books that students chose would prove to be too simple in their writing which would force the teacher to put extra time into constructing questions in order to give a whole new meaning to the written text, thus challenging the student. Teacher C and D pointed it out as something that could be very time consuming and difficult. On the other hand, the strategy was, according to teacher C and D, generally, appreciated among students since it revolved around students’ personal interests. Teacher C further explained that the goal is not always to read one book and then move on, but to create motivation to keep on reading more after the exercise has been completed. Teacher C told us during the interview about a student who at first did not like a particular novel, but through the discussion and looking at the written work from a new point of view, drastically changed his/her opinion.
4.4.4 Referencing

Similar to the previously noted strategy, referencing forces students to revisit the text they have read. This strategy was only referred to by teacher A and C. The general idea was for the student to, as explained by teacher C: “Students are to read and thereafter create a theory or claim which they will thereafter find evidence to prove it” It could also include creating fictional scenarios told from a specific character’s point of view, which demands in depth understanding and creativity. Alternatively, two characters were to be compared to each other by the student thorough information directly taken from the source material. This also requires the student to read carefully and interpret the given text. According to teacher C, one of the major benefits of the referencing strategy is that although students may feel discouraged about reading at first, which was stated not to be uncommon in the average class, the students often ended up finding themselves invested and interested in the material when made to take the point of view of a character. This was similar to the reactions from students to the strategy of discussing, but, seemingly, to a larger extent. Teacher C motivated this renewed interest by explaining that the students would connect with the material on a personal level by using the referencing method. Teacher A and C explained that students themselves have to do the actual referencing on their own, whilst the way of reading could vary from reading out loud to reading on their own. It is also worth pointing out that this strategy has been made possible due to the increased lesson time that was added through the Läslyftet intervention.
4.4.5 Rigorous Reading

Lastly, the final strategy that was discovered was called rigorous reading (plöjläsning, authors’ translation). Out of the seven interviews, this strategy was only used by teacher F. According to this teacher, the goal was to process material provided in textbooks as quickly as possible in order to then move on to reading texts meant for those with English as a first language. His strategy of achieving this included explaining vocabulary in class, reading and practicing vocabulary for homework, and asking students if they had comprehended the texts. It was not made clear by the teacher what level of comprehension he requested or how he assessed this apart from testing knowledge of vocabulary. He further explained that he gave the students new texts to read continuously from various English speaking sources, such as “Euronews”.

He stated that the goal is not to make reading fun, but for students to learn it the “hard way” by reading as much as possible. He wanted the students to experience the benefits of rigorously reading texts in English since, in his opinion; this made students much more proficient readers by the end of the term. He pointed out that there was a difference between being able to understand a text and its literal meaning and being able to understand cultural differences in language. When asked to explain the difference, he stated that various references and idioms may go misunderstood or completely ignored due to students only being used to reading the adapted English texts presented in school books. It was not made clear how he helped students reach this understanding.
5 Discussion

5.1 Läslyftet and Research Based Methods

Our results show that this study has indeed been carried out at a time during which the way reading literacy is taught in school is under scrutiny and development. As we stated in our introduction, for almost a decade Swedish youth have struggled with decreasing results in international surveys on reading literacy knowledge and skills and our results seem to indicate that individual schools have picked up on this and begun taking measures to deal with this problem independently from government funded programs such as Läslyftet. The fact that the studied school has, through its own initiative, created and implemented a programme also called Läslyftet, which includes an increase in hours dedicated to reading among other things, shows us that some school leaders and teachers do indeed take part and make use of research in both policy making and everyday teaching activities, as opposed to what was stated by Calhoon et al. (2013).

However, the use of research based methods for teaching reading literacy was, based on our previous experience, an unexpected result. Throughout our time and experience out on work practice we had not before encountered a school or individual teachers that worked in this way in the particular area of reading literacy. This suggests that the studied school may not represent a general tendency. Rather, the “gut feeling” approach, also described by Lalani and Rodrigues (2012) that we had previously observed and found teachers rely on when teaching reading literacy previous to Läslyftet, may still be prevalent in other schools. The time limitation of the study did not allow further time to explore this issue; however, it would be of interest to compare the studied school to one where no such measures have been taken. It would also be relevant to compare the local Läslyftet implemented in the studied school to the government initiative both regarding practice and theoretical background.
5.2 Assessment or Teaching Methods?

The primary research question posed, if teachers used any strategies for assessing existing levels of reading literacy, generated results which were not what we originally asked for. When analysing the interviews, instead of strategies for assessing previous knowledge we were mainly presented with a variety of methods of teaching rather than assessing reading. These methods may be argued to have been meant to also include formative methods of assessment, such as questioning, clarifying and summarizing, as the reciprocal method advocates (Westlund, 2013, p.48). However, this has not been stated explicitly in any of the interviews and we may conclude from the yielded answers that the methods were not aimed towards assessing existing knowledge.

Possibly, the reason for this result may be, as explained by Westlund (2013) that Swedish teachers mainly use assessment as a summative tool with the purpose of grading. This would explain why the teacher does not deem assessing existing knowledge important. It could possibly also indicate that the teachers do assess existing knowledge but that they do so without realizing it in a continuous process that they do not reflect upon. This could have been looked at in classroom observations; however, due to time limitations, we could not investigate this further. What we could deduce was that there was no conscious effort to assess existing knowledge in a systematic way. An explanation for this may be that teachers seem to rely on “gut feeling” as exemplified by Lalani & Rodriguez (2015) who did perform classroom observations. It may moreover be argued that the way the curriculum and syllabus is formulated influences the teachers’ practices when it comes to assessment as stated by Westlund (2013). We found no indication that it was of importance to specifically assess existing skills in reading literacy in any of these documents (Skolverket, 2011). Furthermore, we could not find a conclusive definition of what the term läsförståelse actually entails in the said documents. This lack of a conclusive definition may lead to a lack of consensus in terms of what should actually be assessed, which may explain why it is not done. In the national tests, the section assessing reading literacy is simply named: “Focus: reading” (Skolverket, 2016).
Furthermore, we learned that when it comes to reading literacy or ‘läsförståelse’ the actual skills that make up the foundation of being literate are not addressed by the teachers. We can only speculate as to why this is the case, but it concurs with what we have observed during our teaching practice. The methods mentioned by the interviewees do include the reading skills we have presented in the literature review section of this essay; however, they are not dealt with explicitly by the teachers. This leads us to ask if the students, as a result, lack the meta-cognitive ability to reflect upon their own reading skills. We find that it may be that if the students were made aware of the skills they were, or were not, using, as well as assessed on these skills and consequently trained to develop them, the levels of reading literacy may improve. This is a very valuable insight to us as future teachers and something we can explore in our own teaching practice as we continue on to teach English.

5.3 Teaching Methods

The methods for teaching reading literacy that were discovered were: *Discussion*, *Referencing*, and *Rigorous Reading*. All three methods were inspired and affected by the addition of Läslyftet with the interviewed teachers referring only to Barbro Westlund’s (2013) work as the source for their methods. Westlund discusses the reciprocal method of teaching and in that method, we found that “discussion” was included; a method in which the content is treated from a variety of perspectives (Westlund, 2013, p.48). The method of “referencing” referred to in the interviews can be connected to Palinscar and Brown’s (1984) strategies; for readers to question the text, to clarify and prove/disprove an idea and to summarize (in Westlund, 2013, p.48). The last method, which differentiated from the others, of “rigorous reading”, puts the added hours to the English course, to use. The method could be seen as rough and repetitive, but it is also discussed in Westlund’s work. It is motivated by the need for constant practice in order to become more efficient, which includes how quickly a reader can decode, and the improvement of the reader’s flow (Westlund, 2013, pp. 54-55.). The flow is affected by the reader’s knowledge of each word, vocabulary and syntax (ibid). Thus. we can conclude that the teachers do indeed employ research, even if limited to Westlund, in their methodology yet, there is little to no evidence that they evaluate students’ existing knowledge when choosing their methods.
5.4 Evaluating Läslyftet – the Inside Perspective

After we had analysed our results, we were given the opportunity to ask the students what they thought about the intervention of Läslyftet and found it valuable to include this in our discussion even though it goes beyond our original purpose. The data was collected a week after the interviews and was in the form of an informal and unstructured discussion. When students were asked about the subject of reading and Läslyftet, the general answer was that they had noticed an increase in reading in the classroom. They believed that the extra hours had a positive effect on their reading skills. A minority of the students said that they also had begun to read more through their own initiative. However, some also raised a concern since the added hours dedicated to reading were, as they stated, “Taking the fun out of reading by forcing students to read more and more”. They concluded their response by stating that the overall experience of Läslyftet had been positive, but that they felt it was not perfect yet, particularly as some teachers used the extra hours of reading very differently from the others.
6 Conclusion

From beginning to end, this study has continuously challenged our perceptions regarding reading literacy and assessment. The first thing we can conclude is that reading literacy is a well-established area of research and that it is given much attention in the guiding documents in Swedish upper secondary school. However, the way the topic is presented in these documents is vague and unspecific, despite the mentioned research that exists, which provides a well of knowledge to draw from. The same can be said about the research area of assessing reading literacy. In retrospect, we feel that the fact that reading literacy receives so much attention may have led us to believe that finding answers to our research questions would be easier than they proved to be. We wrongfully assumed that assessing previous knowledge was an integral part of language, or any type of teaching, because of the research and documents we studied before designing the study. We did not anticipate the difference between theory and practice. The only interview question that had a specific follow-up question was question six, which concerned assessment of prior knowledge, because we anticipated that there would be much information to gain from the interviewees on this topic. It was not until listening to the interviews closely for a second time, that we realized that, in fact, there was not much said explicitly about assessing previous knowledge at all. The possible reasons for this have been discussed in more length throughout the study but to conclude, it would appear the teachers misinterpreted the intention of our study as being mainly concerned with Läslyftet. Moreover, the teachers may not explicitly have stated in what way they assessed previous levels of reading literacy, as they might do so without realizing, and observing them in practice may have generated other results.

As pointed out in the previous paragraph, the guiding documents are vague and unspecific when it comes to the assessment of reading literacy. This led us to conduct searches on the vast homepage of Skolverket, using the terms “reading skills” (lässtrategier) and “assessment” (bedömning) where we came across a subsection called “Reading Comprehension Processes and Reading Strategies” (Läsförståelseprocesser och lässtrategier, authors’ translation). This subsection was far from easy to find as it was the last of seven subsections when counting from the starting page of Skolverket. We felt that the information we found there almost word
by word captured our views on why assessing readings skills is important. For example, it was stated that when assessing reading, it is an advantage to separate the questions asked into dealing with the different reading comprehension processes since this helps the teacher gain a clear perspective on what the reader understands, and in what way he or she has achieved that understanding. Furthermore, that when these strengths and weaknesses become apparent to the teacher, it is easier to see which processes would need to be further developed (Skolverket, 2016). However, this section was not related to English but to the subject of Swedish as a second language. We found no equivalent for the subject of English which surprised us greatly since this was what we hoped for and expected to find. One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the knowledge of how to use assessment when teaching a second language is available, but that English is not adequately treated as a second language. This may be due to the fact that the levels of literacy in English are high in Sweden which can lead to the subject of English being taught in a way that can be categorized somewhere in between a native and second language. In addition, judging by how difficult the information was to find, the knowledge that exists is not made readily available for teachers to take part of and apply to their teaching practice unless they do so by their own initiative.

Regarding Läslyftet, we did find that the teaching of reading literacy had possibly been improved in the school studied, although we can by no means prove this claim with this study. The only thing we can prove is that an effort with the purpose of improving results in this area has been made and we feel that the teachers interviewed had a genuine interest in this process. By making use of reciprocal teaching, as suggested by the work of Westlund, they particularly work with formative assessment which is a positive result although it initially masked the absence of explicit assessment of previous knowledge. It strikes us as strange that such an, according to our literature review, important part of formative assessment is left out in a project which is seemingly theoretically well-grounded and ambitious. As noted before, the teachers may be assessing previous knowledge without actively thinking about it, though another theory would be that explicit assessment is difficult to make use of without it becoming summative in nature. Possibly, summative assessment is currently receiving such negative criticism that the teachers, in an effort to move away from it, have excluded it from their practice to the extent that explicit
assessment is avoided. If this is the case, we would argue that the benefits of finding out in clear detail how well the students use different reading strategies outweigh the eventual downsides of a summative method of assessment. Moreover, a summative test to this purpose would only be one step in an otherwise formative process where the focus would mainly be on the progress to be made from the point of assessment. It would merely be the starting point from which the reciprocal method could then move on. The students will regardless be met with summative assessment in the form of the national tests and possibly also a PISA survey which further strengthens this argument in the sense that it is better to integrate summative assessment in an otherwise formative process rather than either letting it dominate, or excluding it completely.

Another possible explanation to why teachers do not assess previous knowledge is that it is a time-consuming activity both in the sense that it consumes lesson hours and, for it to be productive, it demands individualization based on the results which may be difficult to implement in practice. Increasing the hours spent on reading is, again, a step in the right direction. So are the teachers’ efforts to use hand-picked, authentic texts; however, perhaps the use of the time and resources need to be dealt with in even more creative ways. One way we envisage that time and resources can be used more creatively is through the use of technical and digital aids, an example being eye tracking devices. We speculate that these could be used for, in a quick and efficient way, testing how students’ eyes move across a page while reading which would indicate if they are making use of strategies such as skimming, scanning, reading backwards and forwards, stopping and reading slowly for in depth information and more.

Moreover, the technology, as far as we know, already exists, which makes the use of it a matter of changing the way we think about assessment and teaching in a digital age. Often, the general discussion in media and between teachers, based on our experience, focuses on the negative impact of increased screen time on reading habits. We would argue that the existing research, which as our literature review has shown is mostly made up of theories established prior to the digital age, needs to be updated with research on how the process of how people read has evolved and can continue to evolve.
One implication for assessment is that digital aids may also be used by students in their home environment, since schools in Sweden generally provide students with computers or tablets, which means that they can self-evaluate and monitor their own progress. This does in no way threaten the importance of the teacher since a computer cannot replicate the role of an experienced speaker, replace crucial social interaction, or convey the complexity of human language. It could rather be seen as a tool to make assessment more time-efficient, which in turns provides teachers with more hours for individualized reading activities in class.

Lastly, our results have shown us that the process of assessing as well as teaching reading literacy does not include making the students aware of what reading skills they are using when reading. In our opinion, this is the most tangible way in which the teaching of reading literacy can be improved. Apart from decoding written words, reading literacy also requires a level of meta-cognitive awareness of the process of reading which we argue that the teacher needs to make the students aware of. The students need to be provided with a language they can use for discussing their reading skills. This means they need to know what skimming, scanning, predicting, inferring, reading closely and the other skills we have described in section 2.1 are. This is the first step to being able to practice each skill in an effective way and evaluate the progress made. We find that the teachers do, to a limited extent, deal with some of the skills but they are not explicitly taught, assessed and evaluated. Furthermore, the guiding documents do not provide the teachers with any information regarding how to teach or assess reading skills which means that there is, hypothetically, large differences between individual teachers as well as between different schools in how reading literacy is taught. This leads us to wonder if this is one of the issues that Läslyftet, as in the government funded initiative, has addressed and which could be explored in future research.
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8 Appendices

8.1 Interview Questions

För varje strategi som framkommer, be läraren utveckla

1. Vilka kurser undervisar du?
2. Är Engelska ditt förstaämne?
3. Hur länge har du undervisat?
4. Om du skulle portionera din undervisning, hur stor del skulle läs, skriv och tal ta (i procent)?
5. Om vi fokuserar på läsning, vad för sorts aktiviterer involverar det?
6a. Utvärderar du elevernas förkunskaper innan du väljer ut aktivitet
6b. - och på vilket sätt?
7. Hur har du kommit fram till dessa metoder?
8. Vad är "Läslyftet" och hur har det påverkat din undervisning?
9. Hur fungerar det reciproka arbetssättet i ditt klassrum?
8.2 Mail

Hej,

vi är två studenter från Halmstad Högskola som just nu ska starta upp vårt examensarbete i vårt första ämne som är Engelska. Vi har fått er kontaktuppgifter via Helena Dell'Ara eftersom ni undervisar i Engelska och nu undrar vi om ni kan avvara cirka 15 minuter av eran tid för en öppen intervju om hur ni utvärderar läsförståelse. Vi är intresserade av alla kurser dvs Eng 5, 6 och 7 och givetvis anonymiseras intervjuerna och självklart kan ni dra tillbaka ert deltagande när som helst under arbetets gång. De datum och tider vi har som förslag är följande;

Vecka 14
Onsdag 5/4 08:10 - 17:00

Vecka 15
Onsdag 12/4 08:10 - 17:00

Vecka 16
Onsdag 19/4 08:10 - 17:00

Om ni är intresserade av att hjälpa oss i vårt arbete så svara på det här mailen innan fredag 7/4 med ett förslag på datum och tid som passar. Vi hoppas såklart att så många som möjligt kan ställa upp!

Vänligen Jonatan & Deniz Yeniler/Lundqvist
8.3 Geoff Barton Test

Geoff Barton Test – Reading skills

Answer each question using a couple of sentences that explain your reasoning. The results will be anonymous and will not be used for grading or any type of assessment apart from this study.

Text A

Proud mum in a million Natalie Brown hugged her beautiful baby daughter Casey yesterday and said: ‘She’s my double miracle.’

What kind of text is this and where would you find it?

How do you know?

Text B

The blood vessels of the circulatory system, branching into multitudes of very fine tubes (capillaries), supply all parts of the muscles and organs with blood, which carries oxygen and food necessary for life.

What kind of text is this and where would you find it?

How do you know?
Text C

Ensure that the electrical supply is turned off. Ensure the existing circuit to which the fitting is to be connected has been installed and fused in accordance with current L.L.L. wiring regulations.

What kind of text is this and where would you find it?

How do you know?

Rate how difficult it was to identify the texts; “1” is very easy and “5” stands for very difficult

1 2 3 4 5

Write down which program you are attending

______________________________________