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English reading challenges facing students transitioning from secondary education to (Swedish-medium) university education

Hans Malmström

Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden
mahans@chalmers.se

Abstract

This short paper presents three student scenarios showcasing academic reading expectations across different disciplinary learning settings for undergraduate study in Sweden. A brief discussion is offered around the pervasive presence of English texts in what is – nominally at least – Swedish-medium education. Implications for students’ transition from secondary to tertiary education are briefly provided.

Keywords: *academic reading; reading in English; medium of instruction; reading challenges*

1. Introduction

Students entering tertiary education quickly discover that many, or even most, academic activities in which they engage revolve around texts (e.g., textbooks, scientific articles, book chapters, reports, literary works, essays, and instructions). Reading is widely regarded as an indispensable activity in higher education and something which students are expected to do, not least since it “brings students into discourse within their major”, “enhances composition skills”, and “improves critical thinking” (Howard et al., 2018, p. 190). Researchers have attempted to quantify the amount of reading university students do, with estimates ranging from ≈ 8 hours/week to ≈ 17 hours/week; differences are attributable to discipline and level of study, among other things (cf. St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018).

In Swedish higher education (HE), students read in the majority language, Swedish, as well as in English (and, to a much lesser extent, in other languages); several sources in the literature emphasize how Swedish HE is an arena for parallel language use (e.g., Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012). A recent report from the Language Council of Sweden indicated that the amount of reading in English students are expected to do is significant, even when the medium of instruction is Swedish (Malmström & Pecorari, 2022). Eriksson (2023) surveyed first-year university students and asked about their perceptions of and attitudes towards academic reading in Swedish and English and found that the amount of reading in English is causing many students problems; e.g., (i) 32% feel unprepared to read academic texts in English; and (ii) 89% believe that reading in English takes more time, meaning that the same amount of content cannot be covered. Other research focusing on reading in Swedish HE has established that many students, prompted by their frustration with the expectation to read in English, avoid reading altogether (Pecorari et al., 2012), or actively look for alternative texts in their first language (Owen et al., 2021).

Against this background, it is important to increase stakeholders' awareness concerning the "reading reality" awaiting students in tertiary education. The macro and meso level perspectives employed in much earlier research often provide only limited insights into the individual challenges that students encounter as learners. For this reason, this short paper presents three student scenarios, each of which showcases the reading expectations across three different disciplinary learning (reading) settings. The scenarios are based on real empirical data regarding assigned reading, but the students portrayed are fictional, and their names are fabricated. The scenarios will enable a brief discussion concerning the types of texts and amount of reading in English that is required from students entering Swedish-medium tertiary education.

2. Data and scenarios

The data used for this study are drawn from a very large data set comprising reading lists from a large number (>3,000) of first-cycle ("grundnivå") courses offered across 28 universities and university colleges ("högskolor") in Sweden. The reading lists were provided by the various institutions following a request to access "all reading lists for first-cycle courses where the medium of instruction is Swedish." Information about every text on every reading list was manually recorded into an Excel matrix where each text was classified according to discipline (and sub-discipline), type of text, status (mandatory/optional), language, and (when available) number of pages to be read.

For the purposes of this paper, three scenarios were created; each scenario features a student who is studying a course at a Swedish HE institution (included in the data set for the larger study). For each student, a random *Swedish-medium course* at that institution was selected, and all the texts from that course were included in a descriptive analysis. Collectively, the three scenarios are intended to illustrate the amount of reading in English expected from undergraduate students. One scenario is selected to break down the academic reading challenge further. No claims regarding generalizability are made.

Scenario 1

"Marina" studies geography at Lund University and has enrolled on a 30-credit (full semester) course *Human Ecology: Environment, Culture and Development* offered by the Department of Human Geography.

When taking this course, a first-cycle third-year course, Marina is expected to read 31 texts, totaling > 4,000 pages of text. All the assigned reading (13 books; 11 scientific articles; five book chapters; two compendia; one short philosophical text) is mandatory (rather than optional). Twenty-three out of the 31 texts assigned (74%) are in English (including all the research articles, eight of the books and three of the book chapters). From the point of view of exposure to English versus Swedish text (calculated on the basis of number of pages for each text), 51% of the reading is in English and 41% in Swedish; for approximately eight percent of the reading the language is not known (these are the readings contained in the two compendia).

Scenario 2

"Peter" is studying towards a teacher's degree and is enrolled on *Swedish as a Second Language III for Teacher Students for Upper Secondary School*, a 30-credit first-cycle third-year course offered by the Department for Languages, Literature and Learning at Dalarna University.

Peter is required to read the following (all texts are mandatory): 10 books (six in Swedish and four in English); 32 scientific research articles (29 in English and three in Swedish); eight book chapters (five in Swedish and three in English); in addition to these specified texts, two theses (one in Swedish and one in an unknown language), one novel and one compendium will be added to the reading list (the language of the novel and the compendium is unknown). All in all, 58 texts are on the reading list, 40 (69%) of which are texts in English and 18 (31%) are texts in Swedish. (Information about number of pages to be read was not provided in a systematic fashion for this course).

Scenario 3

“Rena” is seeking a career in Psychology. She is taking the first-year course *Introduction to Psychology* at Karolinska Institutet, offered by the Department of Clinical Neuroscience. The 15-credit course has two obligatory texts on the reading list; both are books in English. Together, the two books cover 1,091 pages of text. In addition, an unknown number of scientific articles is added as required reading during the course (for discussion in seminars).

3. Discussion and conclusion

The reading expectations on Marina, Peter and Rena vary in the three courses they have chosen to study; this is hardly surprising since the syllabi in the three courses also vary significantly. A common denominator across the three courses, however, is the expectation to read a lot of literature in English, despite the fact that all three courses are first-cycle courses where *Swedish is the nominal medium of instruction*; in Rena's psychology course, all the reading is in English, while in Marina's and Peter's courses, reading in English never falls below 50%. When Malmström and Pecorari (2022) investigated reading in undergraduate (Swedish-medium) courses at ten universities in Sweden they found that 49% of all the assigned reading was in English, and that many courses (24%) *only* assigned English texts. A relevant question to ask is whether, and how, students like Marina, Peter and Rena can reasonably cope with their reading assignments when so much of the reading is in a second or foreign language. The answer to this question is fraught with complexity (not least since students adopt a multitude of different individual learning/reading/coping strategies) but we can use our three scenarios for illustrative purposes. Since the Marina scenario provides more comprehensive information, we focus on her assigned reading situation.

Let us assume that Marina is an “average” English as a second language undergraduate student, with a (silent/general) reading at a rate of ≈ 175 words per minute (wpm) in English (as indicated by work in Holland by Dirix et al., 2020) and having a B2-level of general English proficiency level according to the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages](#) (Skolverket, 2022). We know that she would need to read at least 2,000 pages of English text ($\approx 1,000,000$ words) during the 30-credit course (equivalent to approximately 20 five-day weeks of full-time study). When Dirix et al. (2020) measured the reading rate for *studying purposes* – as opposed to silent/general reading purposes – the reading rate was substantially lower, a mere 50 wpm when reading in L2 English. A generous assumption in Marina's case would be that approximately half of the English reading she needs to cover during the course can be done at a pace corresponding to the general reading rate, whereas the other half would have to be done more carefully, and therefore also more slowly. Based on these assumptions, Marina would have to spend a total of 214 hours (or 2.7 hours/day), or just under eleven hours on reading in English per week. However, Marina is also expected to read the *Swedish-language texts*. If she has had her schooling in Swedish, she is likely to read at a faster pace in Swedish, but at a minimum (and assuming a generous mixed-reading rate of 125 wpm), she would need to spend another 111 hours (\approx six more hours per week) on reading the Swedish texts. Suffice it to say that Marina is likely to have to spend many hours of her study

week on reading, and there is an abundance of evidence in the research literature to suggest that she will be challenged (timewise and comprehension-wise) by the large amount of reading in English. Not all students in all first-cycle courses in Sweden find themselves in exactly the same situation as Marina – though the other two scenarios included here suggest that Marina’s situation is by no means unique – but it is hardly surprising that many Swedish students claim to be annoyed, stressed, and feel panic when they are faced with very extensive reading in English (cf. Eriksson, 2023).

The argument could be made that many first-cycle courses are developed not with students’ prior skills in mind, but with a focus on learning outcomes; while such a forward-looking curriculum approach is understandable, it is worth asking what can be done to support the academic reading experience of Marina, Peter, Rena, and other first-cycle students in Swedish higher education. Space in this short paper does not permit extensive reasoning around this topic, but three comments will be provided.

First, lower education could feasibly do more in terms of preparing students for the academic English reading expected of them in higher education because the transition from upper secondary study to higher education does not ‘magically’ transform students from non-readers to readers of academic texts in English. For example, academic texts, and strategies for navigating and strategically tackling academic reading can feature more prominently in the upper-secondary English curriculum. Currently, only the syllabus of the (optional) English 7 course includes references to receptive engagement with scientific text. It would be preferable if *all* students studying on programmes preparing them for higher education had previous exposure to academic/scientific texts and had been introduced to tools for engaging with such texts.

Second, course examiners and teachers in higher education should carefully consider the volume of reading and the nature of the texts they put on reading lists, whether all the reading needs to be mandatory, and whether Swedish alternative texts are an option. Swedish texts would perhaps be particularly welcome in the case of texts representing the “disciplinary canon”, and where deeper understanding on the part of the students is expected. Teachers should also not casually put scientific research articles on reading lists until students have become accustomed to this academic genre; in most academic fields, an overwhelming majority of scientific articles are written in English, and frequently more comprehensible materials are available. Teachers who do assign research articles should, at the very least, allow students (additional) time to properly comprehend the text.

Finally, because it is well known what aspects of academic reading in English students find most challenging – reading takes too long and comprehension is impacted, often because students struggle with English vocabulary, as reported, e.g., by Eriksson (2023) – teachers in higher education can scaffold the reading. For example, they might provide cues to more critically oriented reading, provide pre-reading guidance, ‘chunk’ difficult texts to aid comprehension, and/or draw attention to difficult vocabulary (including academic vocabulary, which rarely receives the attention it deserves). In addition, students themselves can take measures to make their reading easier. This could be done by learning to read strategically, e.g., by pre-viewing texts, reading with a clear purpose in mind, annotating the text, allocating sufficient time to cope with reading assignments, or by identifying alternative sources of information. Reading with awareness, however, is an acquired skill, and it would appear that many Swedish students do not have access to the support structures needed (e.g., reading workshops, reading tutors) to make reading easier (Linda Eriksson, personal communication, October 16, 2023).

This short paper has provided a micro-level snapshot of some of the challenges facing Swedish undergraduate students who are assigned extensive reading in English and indicated potential action for stakeholders. Recent technological advancement notwithstanding, reading assignments are likely to remain a staple of higher education. A deeper discussion about the sustainability of academic reading from the student perspective, especially reading in English, is warranted. In this regard, the English academic reading skills students *bring* to tertiary education deserve special attention.

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