

Executive summary of:
**Reading in higher education:
A quantitative study of student
reading in Swedish and English**

Hans Malmström, Linda Eriksson & Christian Stöhr



Executive Summary

Research Context

A **societal debate** is ongoing in Sweden regarding reading and reading comprehension among children, youth, and students. The debate is polarized, with some stakeholders referring to a “reading crisis”, while others question the crisis narrative and criticize the use of anecdotal evidence.

Reading in Higher Education – Focus on Sweden

This study focuses on reading within Swedish higher education, an area with relatively little research, especially involving large student groups. Previous research suggests a fragmented picture: while some students have no trouble reading academic texts, others face significant challenges. Reading academic texts in English appears to be particularly difficult, with many students feeling unprepared and experiencing negative emotions such as stress and frustration.

Need for More Research

Calls for more research about reading, across educational levels, are heard, and there is a clear need for more research on reading practices and comprehension in higher education. Existing research, though valuable, often relies on non-representative samples, limiting the generalizability of findings. The present study

aims to address this by using a robust sampling method to ensure external validity and provide insights applicable to all Swedish students.

Study Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to explore Swedish students' experiences with academic reading in higher education. The focus was on:

- Mapping students' engagement with academic reading and the extent to which they read required literature.
- Identifying preferred languages for reading academic texts.
- Assessing the perceived difficulty of reading in Swedish versus English.
- Evaluating how well previous education has prepared students for academic reading in both languages.

The study also aimed to contribute research-based insights to the ongoing debate about reading skills, promoting an informed discussion.

Methodology

A **survey** was conducted with 1,000 randomly selected students from a representative online panel managed by a major polling Swedish polling institute, *Verian*. The survey included questions about assigned reading in Swedish and English. Data were weighted to correct for

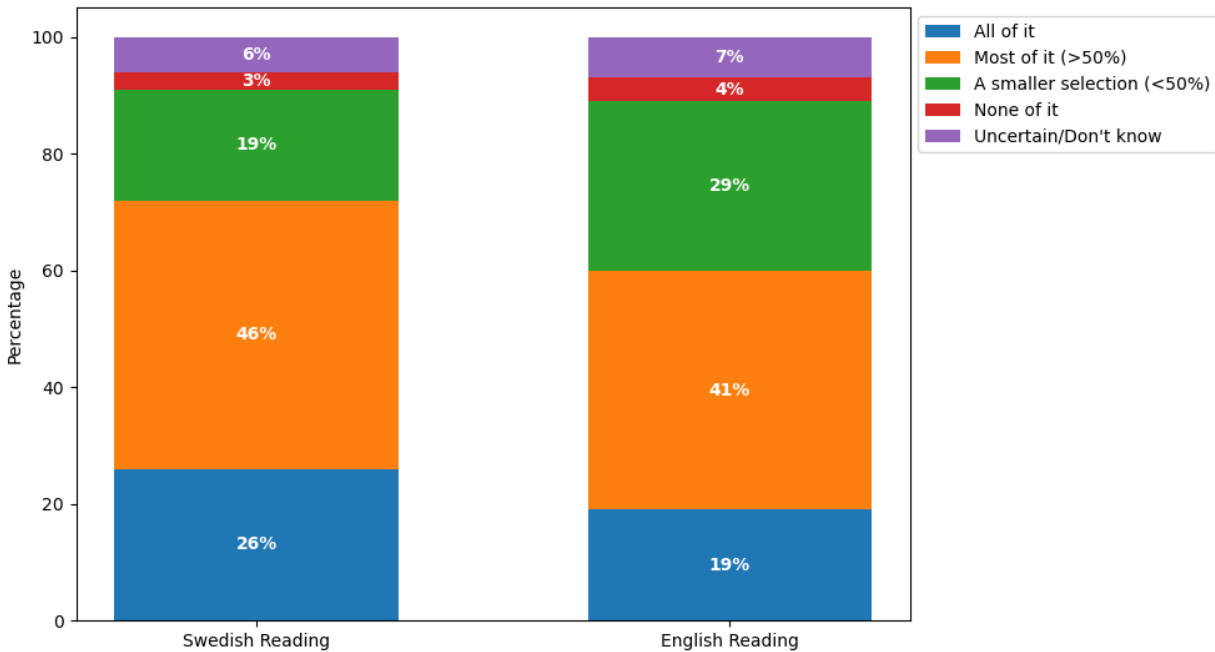
response imbalances and analyzed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests.

Results

The survey results indicate that most students read the required course literature, especially if it is in Swedish. A majority prefer reading in Swedish and find Swedish texts easier to understand. Previous education primarily prepared students for reading in Swedish. Differences were noted among demographic subgroups, e.g., with younger students reading less, female students preferring Swedish literature more, and humanities students being the most diligent readers.

A few key findings and figures from the report (whole group level only) are included in this Executive Summary. Students generally read the mandatory course literature, especially when the texts are in Swedish, see Figure 1. At the group level, 72% report reading most (46%) or all (26%) of the assigned Swedish-language literature. Few students indicate that they read only a small portion (19%) or nothing at all (3%).

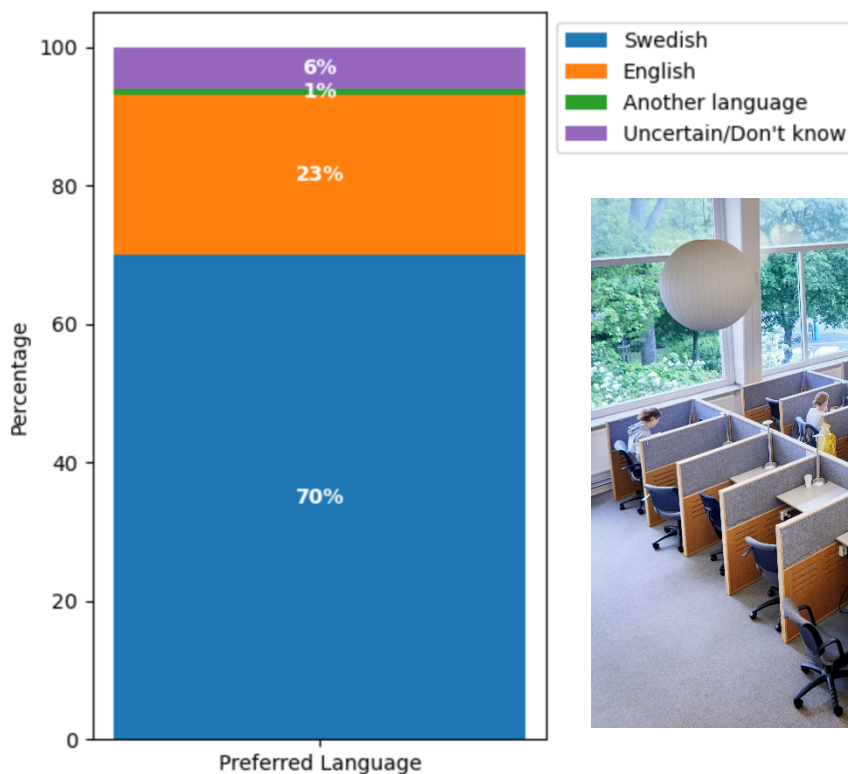
Figure 1: When there is mandatory assigned reading in Swedish or English I typically read:



Even when the mandatory reading is in English, most students (60%) read most (41%) or all (19%) of the assigned texts. However, the inclination to read is noticeably lower for English texts. This is further evidenced by the fact that a larger proportion – 33% – report reading only a small portion or nothing at all when the texts are in English.

Figure 2 illustrates students' preferred language for reading course literature. If students are given the choice, the majority prefer academic texts in Swedish rather than English (Figure 6): 70% of respondents prefer reading in Swedish compared to 23% in English (1% prefer another language, and 6% are unsure).

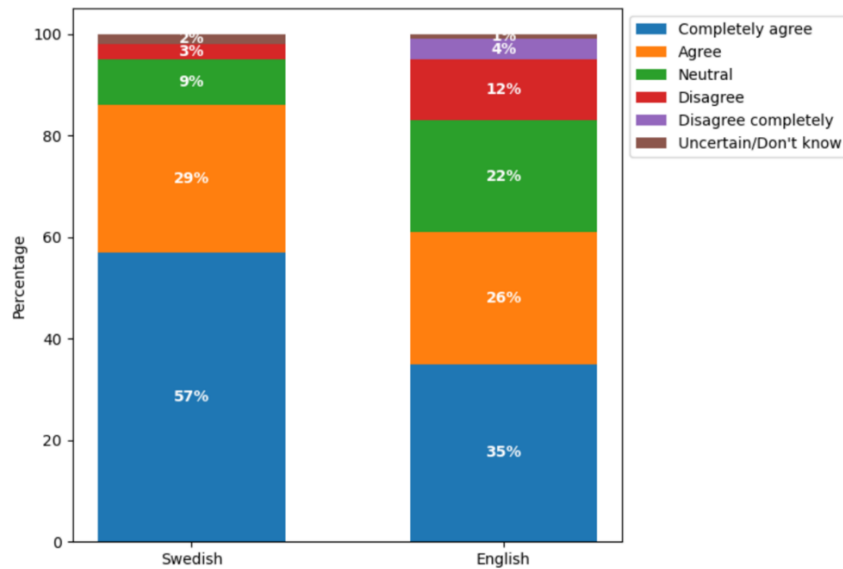
Figure 2: Which language do you prefer for reading course literature?



Most students find Swedish texts easier to read and understand compared to English texts. Among the respondents, 86% agree that it is easy to read and understand course literature in

Swedish (29% agree and 57% strongly agree), as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: I find it easy to read and understand course literature in:

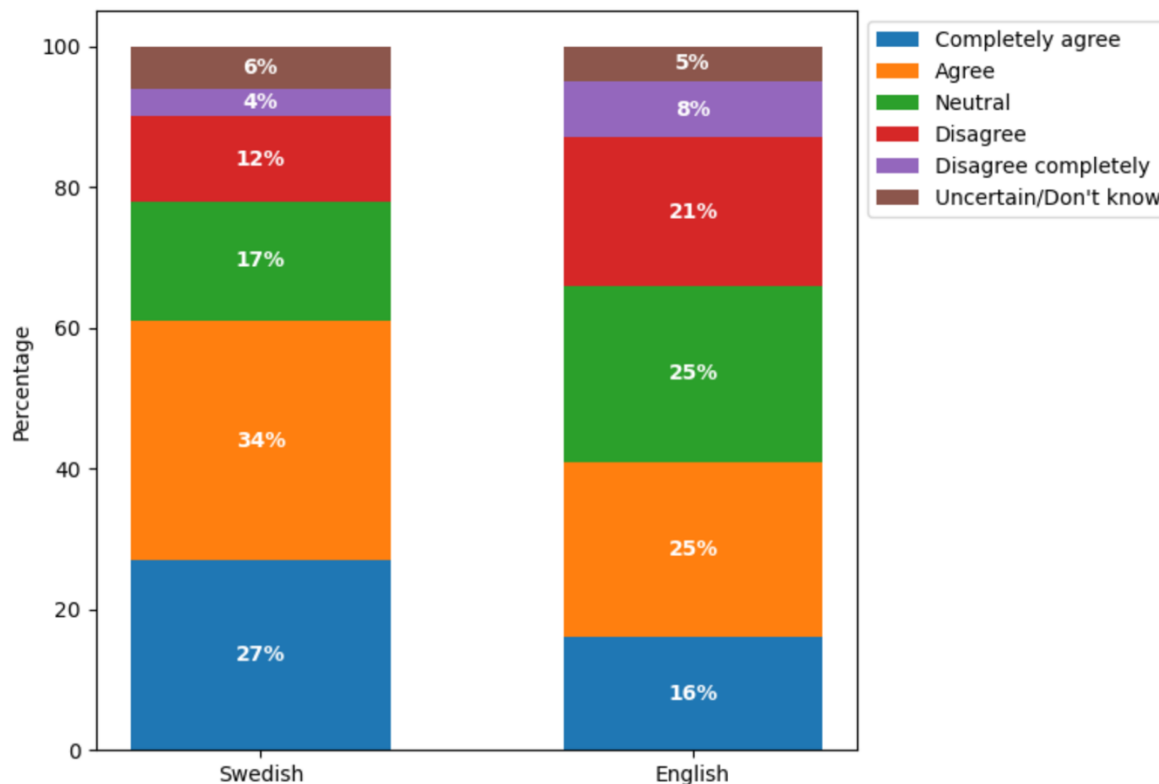


For the same statement about English course literature, 61% either agree (35%) or strongly agree (26%). A minority of 12% explicitly disagree with the statement that English texts are easy to understand. While a majority find it easy to read in English as well, the difference between the two groups is noteworthy.

Students' opinions are somewhat divided regarding the statement that school (primary and

[upper] secondary education) adequately prepared them for reading academic/formal texts in Swedish and English. A majority (61%) agree completely or partially when it comes to reading in Swedish, but 16% disagree. For reading English texts, more students (29%) explicitly disagree with the statement that school prepared them for academic reading, and fewer overall agree (41%), as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Through school (primary and secondary), I was well-prepared to read academic/formal texts in:



Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that although most students handle academic reading well, groups of students are at risk of falling behind due to insufficient reading or comprehension difficulties (subgroup findings – relating to age, gender discipline – are not included in this Executive Summary). How higher education, as well as primary and secondary schools, address these challenges could have significant implications, particularly for the learning outcomes of individual students.

Cite the full report as follows:

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