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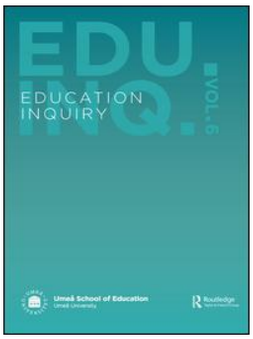

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Assigned reading in English: Compliance, comprehension and preparedness among Swedish students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Swedish university students' engagement with academic reading in English, with a focus on reading compliance, perceived comprehension, and preparedness. Based on a nationwide survey ($N = 1{,}000$), the study offers a representative account of students' academic reading practices and experiences. While a majority of students report reading most or all assigned English texts and generally find them comprehensible, a substantial minority read selectively/not at all and struggle with understanding. Many students also feel underprepared for the demands of academic reading in English. These challenges are unevenly distributed and show systematic variation across demographic groups (gender, age, level of education and academic discipline). Overall, the study highlights that academic reading in English is not merely a linguistic challenge but a socially and institutionally shaped practice. The findings call for more coordinated support across educational levels, including stronger alignment between pre-tertiary and tertiary education, and targeted interventions to support students' developing academic reading literacy. This study contributes to the growing literature on academic reading in non-Anglophone higher education contexts.

KEYWORDS

Academic reading; English reading; student preparedness; reading compliance; reading comprehension

Introduction

In many non-Anglophone countries, the use of English in higher education (HE) has increased significantly in recent years (Agnew & Neghina, 2021). The ubiquity of English is evident not least in the domain of academic reading. The practice of assigning texts in English, even when the teaching is in the national/majority language, is widespread (e.g. Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012). Previous investigations of academic reading in English in non-Anglophone HE settings have indicated that students sometimes find reading challenging (e.g. Eriksson, 2023; Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Hellekjær, 2009; Shaw et al., 2018). However, few studies have gone beyond small and/or local samples (e.g. Eriksson, 2023; Pecorari et al., 2011; Shepard & Morrison, 2021), meaning that there is limited generalisable evidence concerning the extent and nature of these challenges across such non-Anglophone educational contexts. As a result, broader studies incorporating larger, more varied and representative participant pools are needed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how contemporary students in these HE settings deal with academic reading in English.

This study shines a light on students' academic reading in Sweden. In the broader societal context, English is not merely a foreign language but a pervasive presence across multiple domains of daily life, media, business, and popular culture (Mežek, 2024). Most Swedes attain high levels of English proficiency early on, and students thus enter higher education already accustomed to using English in non-academic settings. English also plays a central role in Sweden's higher education, particularly at the advanced level, where many courses and programmes are taught entirely in English (Malmström & Pecorari, 2022). In recent years, teaching in English has become increasingly common also at the undergraduate level, with many courses – especially in disciplines such as natural sciences – being taught partially or entirely in English (Malmström & Pecorari, 2024). Beyond teaching, English is also pervasive in the academic reading assigned to students (Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Malmström & Pecorari, 2022). The academic literature across disciplines is frequently in English, even in learning environments where Swedish is the primary language of

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instruction. Figures presented by Malmström and Pecorari (2022) showed that 75% of the (approximately 1,700) Swedish-medium undergraduate courses investigated by them included at least one mandatory text in English and that, in a quarter of the courses, all the reading was in English. Consequently, students in Swedish higher education are expected to engage with English texts regularly and sometimes extensively.

Adopting a descriptive survey design and drawing on a nationwide representative random sample of 1,000 students in Swedish higher education, the aim of this study is to provide an account of Swedish students' experiences with academic reading in English, focusing on their willingness to read English texts, their perceived comprehension, and their preparedness for academic reading. The study is deliberately descriptive in design. In areas where systematic knowledge is lacking, descriptive studies make a crucial contribution alongside theory-driven work. Currently, no truly generalisable evidence exists regarding Swedish students' reading compliance, perceived comprehension, and preparedness, even though concerns about these issues are recurrent in both research and public debate. By documenting these practices and any variation across groups of students, the study establishes a relevant empirical baseline. Such a baseline not only provides a foundation for future theorising but also delivers immediate, actionable insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers.

Context and background

This research takes place during a period (2024–2025) when concerns about a "reading crisis" in Swedish higher education are widely voiced. Several media outlets have reported on universities lamenting the academic reading abilities of Swedish students, frequently citing students' lacking resilience for academic reading (e.g. Viktorsson & Nyrén, 2024). However, the vast majority of these reports rely on anecdotal evidence and isolated observations rather than systematic research.

Sixteen years ago, Ivanic et al. (2009) highlighted the recurring nature of "crisis narratives" in education, particularly those centred on students' literacy deficits. In their book, the authors pose a critical rhetorical question to educational stakeholders: "How as educators do we respond to such [literacy] crisis narratives? Often we are contributors to them, but should we be?" (2009, p. 14). The authors argue that our responsibility is not to perpetuate the crisis narrative but to instead "consider the situation . . . dispassionately . . . challenge those narratives [and] examine the evidence" (ibid.).

The evidence we present in the present study should be understood against the background of earlier research into students' experiences and practices around academic reading. Our brief review of the literature targets research directly relevant to our study, namely on reading compliance, comprehension, and preparedness in contexts where English is used as an additional language (EAL). We acknowledge that these constructs are multifaceted, encompassing cognitive, affective, and contextual dimensions, and have been conceptualised in different ways across studies. We place particular emphasis on studies from Sweden and the Nordic region, but we also incorporate findings from other EAL contexts where they provide valuable insights.

English reading compliance

In this study, we use *reading compliance* to refer to the extent to which students engage with the reading assigned to them in their courses. Compliance is not a simple binary between "reading" and "not reading", but spans a continuum from full completion to highly selective or strategic engagement (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018). In the higher education literature, such engagement is often understood as part of students' behavioural participation and engagement in learning (Krause & Coates, 2008). For EAL students reading in English, compliance may be further affected by motivational and self-regulatory factors (Pintrich, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002), as well as by institutional practices such as workload distribution and assessment design. While adopting a broad operational definition, we foreground compliance as both an individual decision and a socially situated practice, one that can highlight broader pedagogical conditions in Swedish higher education.

To the best of our knowledge, only a single study has investigated students' reading compliance in Sweden. Eighty-two per cent of the Swedish undergraduate students surveyed by Pecorari et al. (2012) stated that when reading was assigned in their courses, they usually did most of it. When asked more specifically

about their interaction with reading materials in the course they were surveyed about, 53% said they tended to read selectively, prioritising key sections of the book. It is worth noting that the high degree of apparent non-compliance was despite the students' attributing generally positive characteristics to the textbooks they were asked questions about, and despite the majority (88%) belief that it was important to read the book in order to successfully pass the course.

Several studies have reported varying levels of academic English reading compliance also for students in other non-Anglophone EAL academic contexts. Thus, for example, Botha (2013) surveyed students in Macau on their English reading and found that on average 55–59% of the students read most or all assigned material, but there were differences between students from different disciplines. Such disciplinary contrasts are not surprising, since literacy requirements are closely tied to the epistemic practices and expectations of different academic discourses (Hyland, 2015). Similarly, Graham (2024) studied undergraduates in Taiwan learning through the medium of English and found that most read superficially rather than thoroughly. Across two semesters, 14–17% of the students did not do any reading, while 19–35% fully complied. The majority either skimmed or skipped sections, highlighting widespread variation in reading compliance. Selective and strategic reading practices have also been observed among first-language English university students (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018; Aagaard et al., 2014), suggesting that such behaviours are not confined to EAL contexts, but may be shaped by other factors than language alone.

English reading comprehension

We define *reading comprehension* as students' ability to construct meaning from academic texts in English, ranging from literal understanding to deeper integration of ideas. Our focus is on *perceived comprehension* that is, students' own judgements of how well they understand their assigned reading. Perceived comprehension is not only a proxy for actual comprehension but also a factor shaping motivation and persistence in academic reading. Research in applied linguistics highlights that comprehension in a second or additional language is influenced by linguistic competence, vocabulary, reading strategies, and background knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Grabe & Zhang, 2013). Conceptually, our definition aligns with interactive models of reading, where comprehension arises from the interplay of linguistic and cognitive resources (Kintsch, 1998).

It is widely acknowledged that English reading comprehension in academic settings can present significant challenges for students learning through English as an additional language. Research highlights that difficulties arise from limited (general as well as academic) English proficiency, vocabulary gaps, and reduced fluency, affecting both comprehension and reading speed (e.g. Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Shepard & Morrison, 2021). Such challenges are reported across various higher education contexts, including English-medium education and environments characterised by parallel use of the national/majority language and English (usually as a reading language).

Research has shown that students who read in English but receive instruction in their national language (typically their first language) may experience comprehension difficulties. Studies conducted in Sweden (Eriksson, 2023; Pecorari et al., 2011) indicate that many students find reading in English slower, more demanding, and less comprehensible than reading in their first language. Studies conducted in Norway (Hellekjær, 2009) and Iceland (Arnbjörnsdottír, 2018) have similarly indicated that around a third of university students experience comprehension difficulties. These difficulties are often exacerbated by factors such as limited vocabulary knowledge.

In English-medium education contexts, studies have shown that EAL students often find reading one of the most demanding academic tasks. In Hong Kong, students ranked reading as the second most difficult skill, struggling particularly with vocabulary and reading speed (Shepard & Morrison, 2021). Japanese students learning through English reported reading as their most challenging English task, regardless of their overall level of English proficiency (Aizawa et al., 2020).

Not all EAL students appear to struggle with English reading comprehension, however. Shaw et al. (2018) conducted a comparative study on academic reading among university biology students in Sweden and the UK. Their findings showed that while many Swedish students had reading comprehension levels comparable to their UK counterparts, there was significantly more variation among the Swedish students. Later

research using the same methodology (reading tests) confirms these findings in the Swedish HE context (Pecorari et al., 2024).

Preparedness for reading academic texts in English

We use *preparedness* to mean the extent to which students feel equipped, through prior schooling and experience, to handle the demands of academic reading in English at university. This construct recalls discussions of transition literacy in students' movement from school to higher education (Ivanic et al., 2009). Under this view, preparedness is thus not merely an individual attribute but also a systemic outcome, reflecting the alignment (or misalignment) between pre-tertiary and tertiary education. In the context of English as an additional language, preparedness involves both linguistic competence (e.g. vocabulary and reading fluency) and familiarity with academic practices, such as coping with long, often complex texts. This aligns with research on educational transitions that stresses the need for institutions to actively support students' academic literacy development as they move into higher education (Briggs et al., 2012; Wingate, 2007). By framing preparedness in this way, we highlight our belief that responsibility for students' readiness is shared across educational levels and institutions, rather than resting solely on the individual student.

In Sweden, English is a compulsory school subject from primary school onwards, with roughly 480 h of instruction across grades 1–9 (National Agency for Education, 2022). The curriculum emphasises communicative competence, aiming to enable students to use English in authentic situations while also developing confidence in their ability to do so. At the upper secondary level, 2 years of English are required, corresponding to CEFR B2.1, with an optional third year designed to reach B2.2 (National Agency for Education, 2023). Although this curriculum provides students with extensive exposure to English during their schooling, questions remain about how well this foundation prepares them for the academic English demands they encounter in higher education, particularly for those who do not take the optional third-year course.

Existing research in the Swedish context about students' academic reading preparedness offers a mixed perspective. In two studies, Warnby (2023, 2025) assessed the English reading skills and aspects of receptive academic vocabulary knowledge (needed to understand academic texts) among third-year Swedish upper secondary school pupils enrolled in university preparatory programmes. His findings raise concerns about these students' academic reading preparedness. While there was considerable variation within the test group – along with differences between male and female pupils and students from different programme orientations – only a minority met the mastery thresholds for the necessary levels of reading vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, the group's average performance on the reading test suggested that most students do not reach the expected CEFR B2 level required for university studies. Warnby concludes: "Swedish upper secondary education falls significantly short in adequately preparing students for the demanding English academic reading requirements they face in higher education" (Warnby, 2025, p. 14).

Studies from other EAL contexts have also indicated that students who transition from upper secondary school to tertiary education are unprepared to deal with academic reading in English. For example, both Evans and Morrison (2018) and Shepard and Rose (2023) found that Hong Kong students struggled with academic reading to varying degrees. In both studies, the authors attribute differences in reading ability to the conditions of the students' pre-tertiary education, noting, unsurprisingly, that those who received their education in English were significantly better readers of English academic texts than those who were educated in Chinese.

Study rationale and research questions

This study directly addresses calls for increased research about academic reading beyond the Anglophone context (cf. Baker et al., 2019). The Swedish higher education system provides a particularly important site for such research: English is not the national language, yet it functions as a *lingua franca* of academia. This creates specific challenges for students, who must navigate demanding academic reading in English alongside the development of disciplinary literacy in

Swedish. Situating the study in a non-Anglophone context therefore makes it possible to highlight how the global role of English intersects with local linguistic and educational realities, foregrounding the entanglements of English as both a global resource and a local challenge (cf. Pennycook, 2022).

To capture these dynamics in a systematic way, research must go beyond small-scale or local studies and instead draw on designs that provide more representative insights into student practices and experiences. Most previous research – not only in the Swedish context but globally – has relied on small and/or local purposeful (or convenience) samples, severely limiting the generalisability of findings. While such studies are valuable, they also tend to obscure systematic variation across student groups. As noted earlier, previous research has reported considerable variation in reading at the group level, suggesting the importance of examining sub-groups of students rather than treating students as a homogeneous population. In contrast, the present study adopts a large-scale, representative survey design, which makes it possible both to capture national-level trends and to identify meaningful differences across sub-groups of students.

Addressing these gaps will provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of students' English academic reading practices and experiences. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following three research questions:

(1) To what extent do Swedish students, including sub-groups of students, engage in academic reading in English?
(2) To what extent do students perceive that they comprehend academic texts in English?
(3) To what extent do students feel prepared for academic reading in English?

Methods and data

Driven by our objective to better understand Swedish students' experiences with academic reading in English, we adopted a quantitative design centred on a large-scale survey to capture broad trends and patterns among Swedish students. The survey provides a good understanding of students' inclination to read in English, their perceived academic reading comprehension, and their preparedness for academic reading.

Data collection and participant sampling

The survey was constructed in Swedish and contained 10 Likert-scale questions and five background questions; only three of the Likert-scale questions were included for analysis in the present study (the remainder concerned areas only peripherally related to academic reading):

(i) "When there is mandatory English-language reading, I typically read": (all of it; most of it >50%; some of it <50%; nothing; unsure/don't know) → READING COMPLIANCE
(ii) "I find it easy to read and understand academic texts in English" (strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree; unsure/don't know) → READING COMPREHENSION
(iii) "Earlier schooling (secondary and upper secondary school) prepared me well to read academic/formal texts in English" (strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree; unsure/don't know). → READING PREPAREDNESS

We applied single-item measures to ensure completion within a very short timeframe and to minimise respondent burden and fatigue. Although this approach limits the assessment of internal reliability, prior research indicates that single-item measures can demonstrate adequate predictive validity for constructs that are concrete and easily conceptualised (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007), as is the case in this study. The survey was developed in collaboration with Verian, a survey company specialising in market research. Student participants ($N = 1{,}000$) were sampled from Verian's online panel, which consists of approximately 100,000 randomly selected individuals. Panel members are regularly rotated, and self-selection is not allowed. Verian maintains basic biographical information on all panellists, including age and gender. Additional details, such as academic discipline and educational level, were collected through the survey and included as background variables. To correct for response rate imbalances across different groups and

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents ($N = 1,000$).

Variable	Category	Unweighted Frequency (%)	Weighted Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	350 (35.0)	381 (38.1)
	Female	650 (65.0)	619 (61.9)
Age Group	18–29 years	447 (44.7)	618 (61.8)
	30–44 years	416 (61.6)	302 (30.2)
	45–59 years	120 (12.0)	70 (7.0)
	60–79	17 (1.7)	10 (1.0)
Educational Level	Undergraduate	415 (41.5)	443 (44.3)
	Postgraduate	556 (55.6)	531 (53.1)
	Don't know	29 (2.9)	26 (2.6)
Discipline	Agriculture, Forestry, and Veterinary Medicine	17 (1.7)	21 (2.1)
	Education and Teacher Training	150 (15.0)	123 (12.3)
	Technology, Engineering and Manufacturing	120 (12.0)	140 (14.0)
	Health, Healthcare, and Social Welfare	169 (16.9)	157 (15.7)
	Humanities and Arts	99 (9.9)	92 (9.2)
	Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and ICT	156 (15.6)	171 (17.1)
	Social Sciences, Law, Commerce, Administration	250 (25.0)	262 (26.2)
	Don't know	39 (3.9)	34 (3.4)

Note: Henceforth, academic disciplines are references using the following abbreviated forms: agricultural sciences; education; technology; health; humanities; natural sciences; social sciences.

enhance the generalisability and reliability of the results, the data were weighted before analysis. The weighting was based on public statistics from the Swedish Higher Education Authority for the 2023/24 academic year, covering students enrolled in Swedish universities. Adjustments were made according to gender and age. An overview of the weighted and unweighted sample characteristics is presented in Table 1.

The study adhered to established ethical standards for research involving human participants, including the principles outlined by the Swedish Research Council in Good Research Practice (2024). All participants were provided with information about the purpose of the research and the handling of their personal data and gave their informed consent prior to participation. In accordance with Swedish law, no formal ethical review was required, as the data collected are not considered sensitive under the Ethical Review Act or the GDPR, and all data provided by Verian were fully anonymous.

Data analysis

Survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests, as several dependent and independent variables were ordinal and did not meet the assumptions for parametric methods. For gender and educational level, the Mann–Whitney U test (Mann & Whitney, 1947; Wilcoxon, 1945), a non-parametric alternative to the independent-samples t test, was used to compare Likert scale data between the two self-reported demographic subgroups (male vs. female for gender and undergraduate/first cycle vs. advanced/second cycle for educational level). For associations between age and the three ordinal items, a Spearman rank-order correlation (Spearman, 1904) was performed, using Spearman's rho (ρ), which is appropriate for ordinal variables without assuming normality. Finally, to compare the responses across more than two subject groups, we used the Kruskal–Wallis H test (Kruskal & Wallis, 1952), followed by post hoc analyses identifying homogeneous subgroups, if the overall test was significant. All analyses were conducted in SPSS (v. 28) and a complete list of the test results is provided in Appendix A.

Findings

This section presents the findings related to the three research questions. For each question, we outline the results for the whole group of students (all students in the representative sample) as well as relevant findings across demographic sub-groups.

High level of reading compliance for most but not all

At group level, most students (60%) report completing either most or all of the assigned English reading, see Table 2. However, a substantial minority (33.2%) engages with the readings selectively or not at all.

Table 2. *Answer distribution in response to* "When there is mandatory English-language reading, I typically read."

Response	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
All of it	194	19.4%	19.4%
Most of it (more than 50%)	406	40.6%	59.9%
Some of it (less than 50%)	293	29.3%	89.2%
Nothing	39	3.9%	93.1%
Unsure/don't know	69	6.9%	100.0%
Total	1,000	100.0%	–

Table 3. *Answer distribution in response to "*When there is mandatory English-language reading, I typically read:" *by age.*

Demographic variable	Category	All literature	Most of it (>50%)	Some of it (<50%)	No literature	Unsure/ Don't know	Total
Age	18–29	93 (15.0%)	232 (37.5%)	206 (33.3%)	31 (5.0%)	57 (9.2%)	619
	30–44	73 (24.2%)	143 (47.4%)	70 (23.2%)	6 (2.0%)	10 (3.3%)	302
	45–59	25 (35.2%)	28 (39.4%)	15 (21.1%)	2 (2.8%)	1 (1.4%)	71
	60–79	4 (36.4%)	3 (27.3%)	2 (18.2%)	1 (9.1%)	1 (9.1%)	11

Note. Percentages reflect within-group distributions.

A statistically significant but small correlation in reading compliance is observed across age groups (Spearman's $\rho = .191$, $p < .001$; Appendix Table A1), with younger students reporting somewhat lower levels of reading compliance than older students (see Table 3). Among the youngest students, just over half (52.5%) report reading most or all of the assigned English texts, while 38.3% indicate they read selectively or not at all. By contrast, in the next age group, 71.6% report reading most or all of the texts, whereas only 25.2% read selectively or not at all. However, as only 3–4% of the variance in compliance is explained by age, this relationship should be interpreted as limited in practical terms.

Table 4 indicates that students' willingness to read academic texts in English also varies by discipline (Kruskal–Wallis H (6) = 26.11, $p < .001$; see Appendix Table A1). However, none of the adjusted pairwise post-hoc comparisons reached statistical significance (Appendix Table A2). This indicates that while the overall distributions differ, the contrasts between specific disciplines are modest. The rank ordering nevertheless reveals a clear tendency, humanities students display the highest reading compliance (71.8% completing most or all assigned reading), whereas students in health and technology show the lowest engagement. However, these differences should be interpreted as indicative trends rather than statistically confirmed contrasts.

While male and female students exhibit some variation in English reading habits, the differences are not statistically significant (Mann–Whitney $U = 77{,}140$, $z = .86$; see Appendix Table A1). Similarly, no significant differences are found between first cycle and second cycle students (Mann–Whitney $U = 90{,}124$, $z = .75$; see Appendix Table A1) – they complete (or neglect) the assigned English reading to a similar extent.

To summarise, although most students appear to do their assigned reading regardless of how difficult they perceive it to be, there is a significant minority who only read selectively or avoid reading texts in English altogether.

Table 4. *Answer distribution in response to* "When there is mandatory English-language reading, I typically read:" *by subject.*

Demographic variable	Category	All literature	Most of it (>50%)	Some of it (<50%)	No literature	Unsure/ Don't know	Total
Subject	Health	19 (12.2%)	55 (35.3%)	58 (37.2%)	15 (9.6%)	9 (5.8%)	156
	Humanities	33 (35.9%)	33 (35.9%)	18 (19.6%)	1 (1.1%)	7 (7.6%)	92
	Agricultural sciences	7 (33.3%)	5 (23.8%)	7 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (9.5%)	21
	Natural sciences	25 (14.6%)	80 (46.8%)	46 (26.9%)	1 (0.6%)	19 (11.1%)	171
	Education	30 (24.4%)	46 (37.4%)	45 (36.6%)	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)'	123
	Social sciences	53 (20.2%)	123 (46.9%)	68 (26.0%)	12 (4.6%)	6 (2.3%)	262
	Technology	22 (15.7%)	50 (35.7%)	43 (30.7%)	7 (5.0%)	18 (12.9%)	140
	Unsure/Don't know	4 (11.8%)	14 (41.2%)	9 (26.5%)	1 (2.9%)	6 (17.6%)	34

Note. Percentages reflect within-group distributions.

Table 5. *Answer distribution in response to* "I find it easy to read and understand academic texts in English."

Response	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Strongly agree	261	26.1	26.1
Agree	347	34.7	60.8
Neutral	222	22.2	83.0
Disagree	124	12.4	95.4
Strongly disagree	35	3.5	98.9
Unsure/don't know	11	1.1	100.0
Total	1,000	100.0	–

Generally good reading comprehension, with variation

To the extent that students choose not to engage with assigned reading in English, a reasonable explanation may be that some find it challenging. However, a majority of students (60.8%) say that academic texts in English are easy to read and understand, see Table 5.

There are small but statistically significant differences between male and female students in reported English reading comprehension (Mann–Whitney $U = 73{,}391$, $z = -3.45$, $p < .001$; see Appendix Table A3). Male students find academic reading in English somewhat easier than female students: 67.8% of male students agree or strongly agree that assigned reading in English is easy to understand, compared to 57.6% of female students, see Table 6. Reflecting the same general gender pattern, 18.0% of female students either disagree or strongly disagree with this statement, compared to 12.1% of male students.

Educational level also influences students' perceptions of reading difficulty (Mann–Whitney $U = 135{,}443$, $z = 5.29$, $p < .001$; see Appendix Table A3) with a small-to-moderate effect size. Among undergraduate students, 54.3% either agree or strongly agree that assigned reading in English is easy to understand, while 66.8% of second cycle students share this view, see Table 7.

Students in technology as well as natural sciences report the highest confidence in their ability to engage with academic texts in English, see Table 8. Among them, 69.3% and 67.9%, respectively, agree or strongly agree that English texts are easy to read and understand, while only 10–13% disagree or strongly disagree. These students differ from students in education, and students in health, who report lower confidence levels. Just over half of these students say they find reading in English easy, while approximately a fifth express disagreement. The omnibus test indicated overall differences across disciplines (Kruskal–Wallis $H\,(6) = 22.07$, $p < .001$; see Appendix Table A3) but adjusted post-hoc comparisons did not reach significance (Appendix Table A4). These disciplinary contrasts should therefore be interpreted as indicative trends.

Differences in perceived reading comprehension between age groups were not statistically significant (Spearman's $\rho = -.013$; see Appendix Table A3).

Table 6. *Answer distribution in response to "*I find it easy to read and understand academic texts in English." *by gender.*

Demographic variable	Category	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure/Don't know	Total
Gender	Women	139 (22.4%)	212 (34.2%)	149 (24.0%)	92 (14.8%)	20 (3.2%)	8 (1.3%)	620
	Men	261 (32.1%)	135 (35.5%)	74 (19.5%)	32 (8.4%)	14 (3.7%)	3 (0.8%)	380

Table 7. *Answer distribution in response to* "I find it easy to read and understand academic texts in English." *by educational level.*

Demographic variable	Category	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure/ Don't know	Total
Educational level	Advanced level or higher	187 (35.3%)	167 (31.5%)	94 (17.7%)	54 (10.2%)	23 (4.3%)	5 (0.9%)	530
	Undergraduate	70 (15.8%)	170 (38.5%)	124 (28.1%)	64 (14.5%)	11 (2.5%)	3 (0.7%)	442
	Unsure/Don't know	4 (15.4%)	9 (34.6%)	4 (15.4%)	6 (23.1%)	1 (3.8%)	2 (7.7%)	26

Table 8. *Answer distribution in response to "*I find it easy to read and understand academic texts in English." *by subject.*

Demographic variable	Category	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure/Don't know	Total
Subject	Health	33 (21.0%)	51 (32.5%)	41 (26.1%)	23 (14.6%)	8 (5.1%)	1 (0.6%)	157
	Humanities	27 (29.7%)	32 (35.2%)	22 (24.2%)	7 (7.7%)	1 (1.1%)	2 (2.2%)	91
	Agricultural sciences	6 (2.6%)	8 (38.1%)	4 (19.0%)	0 (0%)	3 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	21
	Natural sciences	61 (35.7%)	55 (32.2%)	29 (17.0%)	21 (12.3%)	2 (1.2%)	3 (1.8%)	171
	Education	21 (17.1%)	48 (39.0%)	29 (17.0%)	22 (17.9%)	3 (2.4%)	0 (0%)	123
	Social sciences	68 (26.1%)	86 (33.0%)	61 (23.4%)	35 (13.4%)	10 (3.8%)	1 (0.4%)	262
	Technology	42 (30.0%)	55 (39.3%)	27 (19.3%)	9 (6.4%)	5 (3.6%)	2 (1.4%)	140
	Unsure/Don't know	3 (8.6%)	11 (31.4%)	9 (25.7%)	8 (22.9%)	2 (5.7%)	2 (5.7%)	35

Reading preparedness mixed and uneven

Although a majority of students express confidence in their English reading ability, a significant proportion feels unprepared for the English reading demands at university. Fewer than half (40.2%) agree or strongly agree that their prior schooling adequately prepared them for academic reading in English, while 29.4% disagree or strongly disagree. Approximately a quarter neither agree nor disagree, see Table 9.

Gender shows a small-to-moderate effect on preparedness. Male students are thereby statistically significantly more likely than female students to feel well prepared by their pre-tertiary education (Mann–Whitney $U = 59{,}803$, $z = -5.12$, $p < .001$; see Appendix Table A5), as seen in Table 10. Conversely, a statistically significantly higher proportion of female students disagree or strongly disagree than male students.

Moderate statistically significant differences emerge across age groups (Spearman's $\rho = -.25$, $p < .001$; see Appendix Table A5), with younger students more likely to feel well prepared, see Table 11. Among the youngest students, 47.4% agree or strongly agree that their earlier education provided good preparation for academic reading in English, compared to 30.4% in the next age group, where those who disagree or strongly disagree outnumber those who agree.

Statistically significant differences between disciplines in English reading preparedness due to earlier schooling are limited, although the omnibus test indicated overall variation (Kruskal–Wallis $H(6) = 30.19$, $p < .001$; see Appendix Table A5). As previously noted, students in technology, as well as natural sciences, report high confidence in their English reading ability. They also express greater agreement that their prior

Table 9. *Answer distribution in response to "*Earlier schooling (secondary and upper secondary school) prepared me well to read academic/formal texts in English."

Response	Frequency	Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Strongly agree	156	15.6	15.6
Agree	246	24.6	40.2
Neutral	246	24.6	64.8
Disagree	211	21.1	85.9
Strongly disagree	83	8.3	94.2
Did not attend secondary school in Sweden	7	0.7	94.9
Unsure/don't know	51	5.1	100.0
Total	1,000	100.0	–

Table 10. *Answer distribution in response to* "Earlier schooling (secondary and upper secondary school) prepared me well to read academic/formal texts in English." *by gender.*

Demographic variable	Category	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure/ Don't know/n.a.	Total
Gender	Women	78 (12.6%)	155 (25.0%)	156 (25.2%)	139 (22.5%)	58 (9.4%)	33 (5.3%)	619
	Men	79 (20.8%)	91 (23.9%)	90 (23.7%)	71 (18.7%)	25 (6.6%)	24 (6.3%)	380

Table 11. *Answer distribution in response to* "Earlier schooling (secondary and upper secondary school) prepared me well to read academic/formal texts in English." *by age.*

Demographic Variable	Category	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure/ Don't know/n.a.	Total
Age	18–29	122 (19.7%)	171 (27.7%)	153 (24.8%)	108 (17.5%)	30 (4.9%)	34 (5.5%)	618
	30–44	29 (9.6%)	63 (20.8%)	74 (24.4%)	77 (25.4%)	42 (13.9%)	18 (6.1%)	303
	45–59	6 (8.6%)	9 (12.9)	19 (27.1%)	23 (32.9%)	9 (12.9%)	4 (5.7%)	70
	60–79	0 (0%)	2 (20.0%)	1 (10.0%)	4 (40.0%)	2 (20.0%)	1 '(10%)	10

Table 12. *Answer distribution in response to* "Earlier schooling (secondary and upper secondary school) prepared me well to read academic/formal texts in English" *by subject.*

Demographic variable	Category	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure/ Don't know/n.a.	Total
Subject	Health	26 (16.6%)	37 (23.6%)	38 (24.2%)	36 (22.9%)	13 (8.3%)	7 (4.5%)	157
	Humanities	11 (12.0%)	28 (30.4%)	23 (25.0%)	15 (16.3%)	11 (12.0%)	4 (4.4%)	92
	Agricultural sciences	2 (10.0%)	4 (20.0%)	9 (45.0%)	2 (10.0%)	3 (15.0%)	0 '(0%)	20
	Natural sciences	37 (21.4%)	54 (31.2%)	34 (19.7%)	30 (17.3%)	11 (8.4%)	7 (4.1%)	173
	Education	13 (10.5%)	22 (17.7%)	34 (27.4%)	34 (24.4%)	14 (11.3%)	7 (5.6%)	124
	Social sciences	41 (15.7%)	58 (22.2%)	57 (21.8%)	69 (26.4%)	22 (8.4%)	14 (5.4%)	261
	Technology	23 (16.4%)	40 (28.6%)	41 (29.3%)	19 (13.6%)	3 (2.1%)	14 (10.0%)	140
	Unsure/Don't know	4 (12.1%)	4 (12.1%)	9 (27.3%)	6 (18.2%)	5 (15.2%)	5 (15.2%)	33

Differences in reading preparation between educational levels were not statistically significant (Mann–Whitney $U = 84{,}739$, $z = -.89$; see Appendix Table A5).

education prepared them for academic reading in English compared to many other disciplines, see Table 12. In contrast, students in education report lower levels of preparedness. However, none of the adjusted post-hoc comparisons were significant (Appendix Table A6) and these patterns should be viewed as trends rather than statistically confirmed differences.

Discussion

This study set out to provide a descriptive but systematic account of Swedish university students' engagement with academic reading in English. By focusing on compliance, perceived comprehension, and preparedness, we offer baseline evidence about a practice that is at once highly consequential for student learning and largely undertheorised in higher education research. Rather than advancing a full explanatory model, our aim has been to establish a foundation for interpreting students' reading practices and experiences.

Conceptually, compliance, comprehension, and preparedness can be understood as interconnected expressions of students' perceived capability and participation in academic reading. Compliance reflects behavioural engagement (Krause & Coates, 2008) – whether students act on institutional expectations to read – while comprehension and preparedness capture their cognitive and anticipatory sense of efficacy in doing so (Bandura, 1997). Together, these constructs signal how students perceive and position themselves within the academic reading demands of higher education. From a social-cognitive perspective, such perceptions draw on both individual efficacy beliefs and contextual affordances (Bandura, 1997, 2001), influencing students' motivation and self-regulated learning (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016; Zimmerman, 2000). In this sense, observed differences in compliance, comprehension, and preparedness can be viewed as situated forms of agency, reflecting how contextual and demographic factors shape students' perceived capacity to meet the demands of academic reading in English.

It is debatable whether the findings of this study tell a reassuring or discouraging story about Swedish students' willingness to engage with English academic texts. In the context, it is significant that students were asked to respond to questions posed to them about *mandatory* (rather than optional) reading. When academic reading is mandatory, teachers are arguably entitled to expect a high level of reading compliance and, assuming that students meet the English proficiency requirements for HE study, reasonable levels of reading comprehension.

If teachers and other stakeholders expect students to read and understand *everything*, then they will be disappointed when learning that not even a fifth of Swedish students profess to doing all the mandatory reading assigned to them and that less than two thirds agree that the reading is comprehensible. These figures may seem concerning, but they are not unique to Sweden. Graham (2024), for instance, reported similarly low compliance among EAL students in Taiwan, and no study to date has shown full compliance in any educational setting.

A more realistic benchmark might be whether students engage with *most* of the reading. If so, our findings offer more hope, since an additional 40% of the students claim to do most of the English reading (>50%, but we have no way of knowing whether this means they read 51% or 99% of the literature); this means that a majority of Swedish students read most of the texts expected of them. These findings broadly align with earlier research by Pecorari et al. (2012).

Situating the findings within the higher education engagement literature, (non-)compliance can be understood as one dimension of students' behavioural participation in learning (Krause & Coates, 2008). Krause and Coates' first-year experience studies show, for example, that students' engagement is closely tied to how they manage their workload and prioritise tasks in response to institutional demands. In this light, compliance with assigned reading reflects not only whether students do the assigned reading but also how they weigh its relevance against other academic requirements. Selective reading, therefore, is not simply a sign of disengagement but can be interpreted as a strategic literacy practice affected by disciplinary norms and the pressures of academic workload (cf. Hyland, 2015; St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018).

Variation across sub-groups further illustrates that reading compliance is not evenly distributed across disciplines or age groups. The omnibus test suggested overall variation by discipline, but that these contrasts are modest. Humanities students report the highest compliance, consistent with the reading-intensive nature of their disciplines, while students in health show the lowest. Older students also report higher compliance, perhaps reflecting greater study maturity, though the effect was small in magnitude. Overall, the reported differences indicate that reading compliance is a socially and institutionally situated practice rather than an individual choice to read or not to read.

Students' self-reported English reading comprehension also presents a mixed picture. As many as 61% report finding academic texts in English easy to read and understand. This is encouraging in a context where much of the assigned literature is not in the students' first language and aligns with Sweden's reputation for high levels of English proficiency. It also resonates with earlier research showing that many students in Sweden do feel confident in their English reading ability (Pecorari et al., 2024; Shaw et al., 2018). At the same time, perceived comprehension is not only a matter of linguistic competence. Interactive models of reading highlight how comprehension reflects the interplay between lower-level skills such as vocabulary knowledge and higher-order processes of inference and integration (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Kintsch, 1998). Although a majority report confidence in their English reading ability, nearly 40% of students express uncertainty or disagreement in relation to their ability to comprehend academic texts in English effectively. While our data cannot identify the specific causes of these difficulties, prior research suggests that genres such as research articles pose particular challenges, even for English L1 undergraduates (St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018). Technical vocabulary, abstract reasoning, and unfamiliar rhetorical structures of such academic genres are likely to represent significant barriers for some students, potentially reducing comprehension.

Systematic, though not universal, variation in English reading comprehension is evident across student groups. Differences by gender, level of education, and disciplinary background, though small, both confirm and nuance earlier findings on EAL students' academic reading practices (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). For instance, humanities students, often engaged in reading-intensive curricula, report higher levels of comprehension, whereas health students report lower levels, which may reflect disciplinary orientations that emphasise professional skills over extensive reading (cf. Hyland, 2015). Older students tend to report stronger comprehension than younger peers, perhaps because of accumulated study experience and developing skill in handling English academic texts. In addition,

students at advanced levels of study, and male students more than female students, report greater confidence in their English reading ability. These variations suggest that perceived comprehension might not only be affected by individual skill but also by accumulated exposure, disciplinary demands, and social and psychological factors such as self-perceptions of ability. In this sense too, academic reading emerges as a socially and institutionally situated practice rather than a purely individual competence, a point that should be kept in mind when designing actions or policies to address English reading challenges.

Finally, the findings of this study point to a significant gap in students' preparation for academic reading in English at the point of transition from school to university. From a transition literacy perspective (Ivanic et al., 2009), this preparedness can be seen as developing in the movement between educational levels rather than as a fixed individual trait. Fewer than half of respondents felt that their earlier schooling had prepared them well for this task, while nearly a third explicitly disagreed. This echoes Warnby's (2023, 2025) research showing that many Swedish upper-secondary students fall short of the receptive vocabulary and reading proficiency required for higher education. Our results therefore align with earlier studies suggesting that the transition into university entails new reading demands that not all students are equipped to meet (Evans & Morrison, 2018; Shaw et al., 2018; Shepard & Rose, 2023). But, the patterns are not uniform. Younger students report somewhat greater preparedness than older peers, a trend supported by Löwenadler's (2023) longitudinal analysis of SweSAT data, which indicates an upward trajectory in adolescent English reading skills during the past decade.

Preparedness for academic reading in English is not simply an individual responsibility but a systemic outcome, reflecting how well pre-tertiary and tertiary education are aligned, or not (Briggs et al., 2012; Wingate, 2007). Just like compliance and comprehension, preparedness to read in English should be understood as a socially and institutionally situated process: it is jointly constructed through the interaction of students' prior schooling, disciplinary practices, and university expectations (Ivanic et al., 2009). While some students demonstrate resilience in coping with English reading demands – developing strategies to manage heavy or complex reading loads (Baron & Mangen, 2021) – the responsibility for meeting these challenges should not fall on individual students alone. The unevenness of preparation across groups points to the need for shared institutional responsibility. Schools can strengthen preparation by integrating advanced English texts and strategies for handling academic genres in mandatory courses or by making the third-year English course in upper secondary school mandatory across all higher-education preparatory programmes. Universities, in turn, can support students' adjustment through early interventions such as workshops, reading support, or a phased introduction of academic reading in English. In this sense, preparedness is best understood as a transition literacy that depends both on the resources students bring with them from earlier schooling and the support they encounter as they enter higher education.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to provide a descriptive account of Swedish students' engagement with academic reading in English, focusing on their compliance, perceived comprehension, and preparedness. The results show that while many students report engaging with assigned reading, understanding their texts, and feeling prepared, sizeable minorities do not, with systematic variation across demographic sub-groups of students. The findings thus indicate that compliance, comprehension, and preparedness are not simply matters of individual willpower or skill but socially and institutionally shaped practices that depend on the preparation students receive in school and the support provided at university.

Like other large-scale surveys, this study has limitations. Most importantly, it does not capture the grounded, qualitative perspectives of individual students, and the key constructs of this research were assessed through single-item measures, which constrains the depth of analysis and calls for further validation. Nonetheless, the findings provide a useful descriptive baseline for future research to build on. They establish a foundation for theory-driven work on academic reading and transition literacy, while also offering immediate, practical insights for teachers and other stakeholders who make decisions about students' English reading loads.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Test statistics for "*When there is mandatory English-language reading, I typically read.*"

Variable/Comparison	Test	Statistic	*z*	*p*	Effect size
Gender (Men vs. Women)	Mann–Whitney U	$U = 77140$	.856	n.s.	–
Educational level	Mann–Whitney U	$U = 90124$	.751	n.s.	–
Age	Spearman correlation	$\rho = .191$	–	.000	$\rho = .191$
Subject	Kruskal Wallis	$H(6) = 26.112$		< .001	$\varepsilon^2 = .026$

Table A2. Homogeneous subsets for *"When there is mandatory English-language reading, I typically read:"* based on subject. Homogeneous subsets are based on asymptotic significances. The significance level is .05. Each cell shows the sample average rank of subject.

	Subset		
Subject	1	2	3
Health	357,138		
Technology	389,910	389,910	
Natural sciences	415,139	415,139	
Social sciences		426,160	
Education		430,690	430,690
Agricultural sciences		455,188	455,188
Humanities			507,313
Test Statistic	5,339	2,679	5,170
Sig. (2-sided test)	,069	,613	,075
Adjusted Sig. (2-sided test)	,154	,735	,167

Table A3. Test statistics for *"I find it easy to read and understand academic texts in English."*

Variable/Comparison	Test	Statistic	*z*	*p*	Effect size
Gender (Men vs. Women)	Mann–Whitney U	$U = 73391$	.-3.451	< .001	r = –.114
Educational level	Mann–Whitney U	$U = 135443$	5.285	< .001	r = .170
Age	Spearman correlation	$\rho = -.013$	–	n.s.	–
Subject	Kruskal Wallis	$H(6) = 22,072$	–	< .001	$\varepsilon^2 = .020$

Table A4. Homogeneous subsets for *"I find it easy to read and understand academic texts in English."* based on subject. Homogeneous subsets are based on asymptotic significances. The significance level is .05. Each cell shows the sample average rank of subject.

	Subset		
Subject	1	2	3
Education	379.067		
Health	402.368	402.368	
Social sciences	434.199	434.199	434.199
Agricultural sciences	453.917	453.917	453.917
Humanities		476.530	476.530
Natural sciences		479.844	479.844
Technology			489.472
Test Statistic	4.940	9.475	5.555
Sig. (2-sided test)	.176	.050	.235
Adjusted Sig. (2-sided test)	.288	.070	.313

Table A5. Test statistics for *"In school (secondary and upper secondary school) I was well prepared to read academic/formal texts in English."*

Variable/Comparison	Test	Statistic	z	*p*	Effect size
Gender (Men vs. Women)	Mann–Whitney U	$U = 59803$	.-5.119	< .001	r = –.174
Educational level	Mann–Whitney U	$U = 84739$	–.892	n.s.	–
Age	Spearman correlation	$\rho = -.252$	–	< .001	$\rho = -.252$
Subject	Kruskal Wallis	$H(6) = 30,185$	–	< .001.	$\varepsilon^2 = .030$

Table A6. Homogeneous subsets for *"In school (secondary and upper secondary school) I was well prepared to read academic/formal texts in English."* based on subject. Homogeneous subsets are based on asymptotic significances. The significance level is .05. Each cell shows the sample average rank of subject.

	Subset		
Subject	1	2	3
Education	341,685		
Agricultural sciences	399,750	399,750	
Humanities	402,506	402,506	
Social sciences	402,562	402,562	
Health	415,940	415,940	
Natural sciences		471,162	471,162
Technology			488,709
Test Statistic	7,661	8,508	,137
Sig. (2-sided test)	,105	,075	,711
Adjusted Sig. (2-sided test)	,144	,103	,987